THERE'S NO OFFER FOR HER TO REFUSE ...

DISORGANIZED CRIME



a Kat Makris Greek Mafia Mystery

ALEX A. KING

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For Dad, who—as far as I know—is really just a baker

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Also by Alex A. King

Chapter 1

WHEN I WAS EIGHT, I was one of those little girls whose heart belonged to Daddy. But for safekeeping, he said, he kept it in my chest instead of a mason jar in the freezer.

"Don't listen to him," Mom said when she saw the horror buttering my cute pixie face. "He's got all the dangly man parts, but your father's a weirdo drama queen."

In those days, my dad was over-the-top. Melodramatic. *Greek*. He announced every bathroom visit, passed gas like he was competing for a prize, and sported a six-pack when other dads had long passed the age where they cared about sucking in their guts.

In contrast, Mom was a solid American gal. A down-to-earth, easy-going, pancake-making realist. She had a face like a beauty queen, but she shunned blowouts for ponytails, heels for hiking boots, cosmetics for Chapstick. Her idea of high drama was cursing when she hooked a little toe on the coffee table, something that would drive even a saint to go foraging for f-bombs.

Somehow my folks had made marriage work, and the place they made it work for twenty years—before a bitch called cancer snatched Mom out of our lives and stuffed her in an early grave—was Portland, Oregon, a city where there's a coffee shop on every corner and rain in the forecast nine months out of twelve. In late spring, Portland won a brief reprieve when the rain packed its sodden bags and went to Florida to wait on hurricane season.

"Greece is paradise," Dad used to tell Mom, when she made fun of his Greek melodrama. "Portland is like a witch's *mouni*. Always wet, always cold. I don't know why I stay here."

Their conversation always played out the same way. My mother's reply, by my eighth year, was as canned as a sitcom's laugh track. "So go home."

He would heave out a whale-sized, theatrical sigh. "How can I go home when I have the two of you tied to my ankle, making my life miserable?" He always topped it with a wink so I'd know he was kidding. If we were an anchor, he was moored someplace that made him happy.

"It's just his way," Mom told me. "The problem is that Greece has the longest umbilical cord in history, and instead of nutrients it pumps delusions into your father's head. To him, Greece will always be paradise. Beautiful, virginal women. Perfect beaches. The best food in

the world. No crime."

After a brief moment of panic on her part when I asked her to define *virginal* (she went with 'untouched'), I moved on to my real question.

"They don't have crime?"

Now there was a concept completely alien to an American kid. Crime was something we did better than anybody, except maybe the Mexican and Colombian drug cartels.

Mom, being a straight-shooter, said, "There *is* crime—that's the point. As much crime as anyplace else. But your father keeps Greece up on a pedestal. If he went back he'd die of culture shock."

When I went to my father later and asked him about crime in Greece, he scoffed. "There is no crime in Greece because we are Greek. We are civilized. We know better."

To eight-year-old me it sounded boring. I mean … what did they do for news? Even at that age I was aware we lived in a country that thrived on disaster. Advertisers counted on our addiction to atrocity. When I said it out loud, he laughed. "Greece is not boring. Come sit, I will tell you a story."

I remembered standing there for a moment, trying to decide whether to sit or not. Dad's stories had a way of turning horrifying and weird. Most of them featured a creature known as Baboulas, the Greek boogeyman. Baboulas was a terrible creature, one with a small army of lesser boogeymen who did its bidding. They would traipse out into the night, silencing anyone they considered a threat to their boogeyman way of life. There were only two ways to escape Baboulas, the way he told it: death or the Witness Protection Program—and the second one was kind of iffy.

In the end, I sat there wide-eyed, chin resting on my fists, as he spun the tale of Baboulas riding Pegasus into the Cyclades to collect gold from a medicine man, who had vanished with the gold and the medicine. Baboulas, upon discovering the medicine man's whereabouts, took the gold, swiped the medicine, and pushed the man off Pegasus's back into the Aegean Sea.

When he was done I said, "But you said there's no crime in Greece."

"That is not crime," he told me. "That is life."

Approximately twenty years later I'd discover he was wrong. It was both.

Summer in Portland. Day thirty-something without rain. The air crackled like empty chip bags, and the grass lay panting on top of dry dirt. Around the area trees were still green. They were used to

Portland's annual mood swings, so they knew to dig their roots deep. This kind of weather brought the convertibles out, their drivers white-haired and hellbent on using the roads their taxes paid for any way they pleased.

No convertible for me. I was a faithful driver, sticking with my aging Jeep, through mud and dust and the occasional snow. We'd been together ten years, since my eighteenth birthday, and I wasn't sure who I'd be without my same-old wheels. I didn't even throw a longing glance in the direction of those topless cars. Air conditioning trumped warm, carbon monoxide-laden air.

Okay, so it was a vanity thing, too. My long, dark hair was being uncharacteristically well-behaved. For once, it was laying flat on my back, exhausted after a butt-kicking from the straightening iron. Zipping away in a convertible would have been like tossing a toddler into a candy-filled pit. Behind black shades my eyes were brown. I wore sunglasses all year round, out of habit mostly. But in summer they were a necessity. The sun wanted to gouge out my eyes, I just knew it.

It was Sunday afternoon, and I was on my way back home to pick up Dad for our weekly father-daughter eat out. Butterflies were breakdancing in my stomach, but my hands and chest felt as though I'd plunged them into ice water. I felt a happy kind of sad. Unbeknownst to Dad, I had an announcement of the life-changing kind, and the plan was to dish the big news over food someone else had cooked.

Tonight it was Chinese, a new place we'd never tried. "What do I want to eat Chinaman's food for, eh?" Dad had said when I picked the place off a flyer someone left swinging on the front doorknob. "All they eat is rice, rice, rice. If they were smart they would foreclose on America and take her *patates*. *Patates* are good, hearty. They make you strong."

There were a lot of things on Dad's list of Popeye-worthy foods—most of them with Greek names.

We took turns choosing, and never the same place twice. Dad's idea. Good thing Portland—like most cities—had a never-ending crop of eateries opening and closing, when they failed to make moolah. "I never know who could be following me," he often muttered.

"Maybe Baboulas?" I would ask, remembering those childhood stories.

"Heh. Yes, maybe Baboulas. And I do not want Baboulas to find me."

I pulled into the driveway, swearing when I spotted Reggie Tubbs sitting out on his porch wearing his robe. Like a garden gnome, our next-door neighbor was a permanent fixture. He was always there,

always in the same blue-and-white robe. The guy was eighty—at least—but he never missed an opportunity to fling open his cotton curtains and show me what he was made of.

Mostly what he was made of was a sausage casing with the goop scraped out.

The house I grew up in was off-white paint slapped on wide planks. The lawn was neat and weed-free. Three bedrooms, two-point-five bathrooms, and a deck stuck to the back that we all built together the year I turned ten. It was a solid house in a good neighborhood. The perfect place to scar kids for life.

"Hey, Kat," Reggie called out, his voice high and excited.

Kat. Short for Katerina Makris. If I'd been raised in Greece I'd be Katerina Makri—no s. But in America everyone is created more or less equal—including women, at least most of the time—so I get to keep the s.

"Hey," I said without glancing over.

Never make eye contact with a weenie waver. It only encourages them.

"How's Mike doing?"

Mike was what Dad had been calling himself since he hopped on an America-bound boat thirty or so years ago. I guessed it was easier to swallow than Michail, which was the complicated way Greeks pronounce Michael.

"Fine. See you, Mr. Tubbs."

Hopefully just his face, next time.

After scuttling around the side of the house, I beelined for the back door. It was hard to look at the place without remembering I was down to one parent. Mom had died nine years ago this November. After her funeral, I ditched college and bounced from job to job, until I landed in a cubicle at a debt collecting agency. Harassing occasionally respectable people for a living wasn't my idea of fun, so I smothered my sorrows in junk food and television on a nightly basis, and made promises to myself that—so far—I'd never kept. Go more places. See more stuff. Probably I was going to die in my cubicle, trying to squeeze green blood from an unemployed stone. Before I turned thirty, I planned to invest in cats.

Dad wasn't at the door. Normally, when he wasn't working, he whipped it open before I had a chance to pull out my key. This time not only did I have ample time to isolate the key on my keyring, but I stuck it in and turned without hearing him on the other side.

God, what if he'd fallen and smashed a hip? He was only fifty-five but it could happen—couldn't it?

Completely unprepared for the possibility of having to bury another parent, I went room to room, hunting for Dad. No mess.

Nothing out of place. No sign of a struggle or a death. Car in the garage. But no Dad. He was simply … gone.

Aliens. It had to be aliens. There was no other logical explanation.

I trotted outside, calm on the outside, a Jackson Pollock painting splattered on the inside.

"Hey, Mr. Tubbs." Sunglasses firmly in place, I cut my eyes to the sky and hoped he wouldn't notice. "Have you seen Dad today?"

"What day is it?"

"Sunday."

He thought about it for a moment. "Maybe. If you look at Reggie Junior I'll tell you what I know."

"Not fair."

"Life isn't fair. And I'm kind of an asshole."

Kind of? I should call the police, make them squeeze him like a tube of toothpaste, but old Reggie Tubbs was a former judge. The police wouldn't touch—or look—at him.

"Just a quick glance," I said, trying to bargain with the wrinkled devil.

He zipped his lips, threw away the key. Very mature.

"How long?"

He shrugged. "Until I say stop."

"How long's that going to be?"

"You're cute," he said. "It's going to be a while."

Eww. "Can I close one eye?"

"No. Both eyes open. Sunglasses off."

Nightmares. Years and years of nightmares ahead. Probably I'd need therapy.

"Okay," I said. "Get it over with."

His face fell. "Where's the enthusiasm, the love? I don't show it to just anyone."

Oh, I doubted that. "Just hurry up and show me."

"Women," he said. "Always telling a man what to do. Next thing you'll be cutting off my balls, making yourself a change purse out of the sack." He tied the robe, sat back down in his chair. "I don't want to show you now."

Christ on a cracker. "What about my father?"

The old judge shrugged. "Some guys came and took him away. He didn't look happy."

"Who were they? The police? Internal Revenue Service?" I thought about it and came up empty. Dad was a law-abiding citizen. Bills were paid on time. Taxes filed before the April 15 deadline. He bought Girl Scout Cookies, and he worshipped at the nearest Greek Orthodox church, when he wasn't out with the truck. He drove all over the country for a company that made packing peanuts and bubble wrap.

"Do I look like I know? I mind my own business when it comes to men who look like that."

"Like what?"

"A pair of old-school guidos. Like they walked straight off a plane from Sicily and drove right here. Every time I've seen men like that, they've been on the guilty side of the courtroom."

"Are you saying …" My brain crunched the numbers while I blinked stupidly. "… mobsters took my father?" Portland did weird better than anyone, except maybe New York, but we didn't do organized crime of the Italian-American variety. That I knew of.

He held up both hands. "I'm not saying anything that can be used against me in a court of law."

"Should I call the police?"

"He's your father."

"Would you call the police?"

"I don't think they can help you," he said. "Go inside and wait. That's what I'd do. Ten bucks says you'll be hearing from those guys soon. Then you can call the feds."

Did I wait? Ha. No. I got on the phone pronto, called the police. They asked a few questions then blew me off because being hauled out of the house by *Godfather* wannabes wasn't a big deal unless he'd gone kicking and screaming. Until he'd been missing twenty-four hours, or someone demanded ransom, they wouldn't do squat. So I sat on Mom and Dad's couch, ordered a pizza, and waited for something to happen.

Going home was out of the question.

About that …

As of today, I was officially the renter of a one-bedroom cell in a sad apartment building, where hope went to grow old and die. My new neighbors were old people waiting to qualify for a slot in a nursing home, and young women waiting for the boyfriend of the week to propose.

Dad was going to hate it.

I got it, though. He was lonely. I was lonely, too, since we lost Mom. She went to the great hiking trail in the sky long before her parenting shift was over. Tonight I had planned to tell Dad I was moving out. If I'd done it sooner, before signing the lease, he'd have guilt-tripped me into staying, with a combination of puppy-dog-eyes and lectures about *philotimo*. *Philotimo* is the concept Greek parents trot out when it suits them. It's a bundle of virtues shoehorned into one box. Do good, be good, love and respect your elders—okay, it's

basically the ten commandments, but without the religious angle. It's a philosophy. Anyway, anytime the mountain—me—rumbled and made noises about moving out, Dad launched into his *philotimo* speech.

And now here I was, twenty-eight-years-old, still living at home.

I was way overdue for a good moving-out.

The doorbell chimed.

Holy cow, the pizza was quick tonight. I'd barely called and now here it was. Man, now that's service! Purse in hand, I flung open the door. Two bozos were standing on the porch, not a pizza between them. The one on the left was short. I was five-four. We were almost eye-to-eye. And I was barefoot. He was mid-thirties, with no butt and no hope of keeping pants up if he lost his belt. Monobrow guy on the right was taller, bigger, softer. Poke a finger in his belly, I bet he'd giggle. They were both dark-haired and olive-skinned. Their noses were vaguely familiar. They wore dress pants with short-sleeved white shirts, so for a moment I almost pegged them for Latter-day Saints. But they'd arrived on my doorstep without bicycles, Books of Mormon, or name tags. Neither looked intimidating so I wrote them off as not being Dad's kidnappers. I could take them both in a simultaneous thumb wrestle.

"Katrina Makri?" the skinny bozo asked in accented English.

"I'm Katerina Makris." My eyes narrowed. "Who's asking?"

They looked at each other, then back at me. "We are," he said. His attention snapped back to the bigger guy. "Nobody told me she was blind. Did they tell you?"

The other guy shrugged. "Nobody tells me anything."

"I can see just fine. It's American thing, my way of asking who the hell you are."

"We are nobody. Well, I am Takis." The little guy pointed to himself, then nodded at the other guy. "And that *malakas* is Stavros."

Greek. Obviously. As if their accents didn't give it away. Sounded like they were dragging the English language through a pit filled with sludge.

"And you're on my doorstep … why?"

"For your father. We need to take Michail back to Greece."

"He's not home."

They pushed past me. I would have fought them off, but I was standing there stuck on stupid, incredulous that they'd barged in without an invitation. They glanced around the house. The bigger guy—Stavros—wandered into the kitchen, peered into the fridge. The knitting needle with feet began picking up and putting down family photos.

Inside my head a siren began howling. Red lights flashed. Mentally, I banged my head on a brick wall. "Wait, did you guys take

my father?" I could see where a guy like Reggie Tubbs would mistake them for mafiosos. Dark hair, olive skin, distinctive noses.

They looked at each other again, mystified. Not too bright these guys.

"No. Why would we take him? He is already ours," the chubby one said.

"Your what?"

"Family," the short one—Takis—said.

"That would make you …"

He squinted at my parents' wedding photo on the living room wall. "Your family, yes."

It was awful to admit, but I didn't know a thing about the Greek branches of my family tree. Dad always employed a certain amount of amnesia when it came his—and my—relatives. Greece he loved. His family … What family?

"Like Zeus, I was raised by goats," he always said. "Goats are okay, but the conversation is terrible. All they say is *maa-maa*, like your mother."

"Dad was kidnapped," I told them. "I think."

They exchanged glances. Takis did the talking. He seemed to be the designated mouthpiece. "Kidnapped! Who took him?"

"A couple of guys."

"What did they look like?"

"Like the mafia. That's what Reggie Tubbs said."

"What is a Reggie Tubbs?"

"He's our next-door neighbor."

They glanced at each other again. These two clowns could have been a comedy act. I still wasn't sure they weren't.

Takis said, "Baboulas will not be happy if we come back without him. Let's bring the girl. She can tell Baboulas."

"Good idea," said the other one.

"I'm not going to Greece." Because I had to stay here and wait for Dad to show up or his kidnappers to make their demands. "So you're my …?"

"Cousins."

"First cousins?"

Takis jerked his head up and made a *tst* sound. "No. He is your second cousin, and I am your cousin's cousin's cousin. Look at Stavros, he single, can't you tell? But not me. I have a wife, Marika. She was very beautiful like you, but now she is fat and always nagging me. 'Takis, why do you leave your underwears on the floor? Takis, what are these stains? Didn't your mother teach you how to wipe?' "

I held up one hand. "I don't want to know."

Both men gasped and crossed themselves frantically.

"Don't do that!" Takis barked. He knocked my hand out of the sky. "What is wrong with you? Did you father teach you nothing?"

I looked at my hand, inspected it for cracks, leaks, stigmata, or anything else offensive. In the end, it was just a hand.

"I don't get it," I said truthfully.

"It is an insult!"

"What, this?" I held up my hand again, palm out, facing them.

"Yes, don't do that! It is a very big Greek insult. It means you are rubbing shit in our faces," Takis said.

"It means we are *malakas*," Stavros added.

"Eh." Takis shrugged. "It means both things. You are rubbing the shit in the faces of two men with—" He shook one loose fist in the air. "—habits that have made the clever places in their heads soft."

"So I won't do this again, then?" I flashed them the palm just one more time for luck—not good luck, judging from the looks on their faces.

Sometimes I couldn't help myself.

Takis hooked a thumb at me. "Baboulas is going to have a problem with this one."

"Baboulas?" They kept saying that name. "The boogeyman?"

They looked at each other. Laughed. Takis pulled something out of his pocket. Something in a syringe, with a big pointy needle.

"Hey," I yelped. "You can't do that!"

But he stuck me with it anyway.

If this was family, I hated them already.

Chapter 2

WHEN I CAME TO, it was in leather pieces. Good leather, in soft beige tones. My chin was wet, my eyelids heavy, and there was something thick blocking the "I hate you guys" in my mouth. Probably my tongue.

"Hewltp," I said.

A face filled my entire visual field. It had a stubble like a bear's butt, and garlic breath. It was my second cousin Stavros. He squinted at me, then vanished.

"Hey, Takis. I think she's waking up."

My cousin's cousin's cousin's voice wafted back. "Get her a drink."

Stavros's face reappeared. "Hey, Katerina, you want a drink?"

"I want to go home."

"Heh." He stood up. "She wants to go home."

"Tell her she is going home," Takis called out.

"Where am I?"

Stupid question. I was on a plane. A small plane. A very expensive small plane, judging from the leather seats, carpeted floors, and distinct lack of other passengers.

"You are on a plane," Stavros said in a self-satisfied voice, like he'd just performed magic.

"And we're going … where?"

"Home. Greece." Palms up. "Where else?"

I pulled myself into the upright position, more or less. My teeth had a buzz cut and my tongue had acquired a toupee. I needed toothpaste, soap, and a parachute.

"I can't go to Greece, I don't have a passport."

Stavros laughed. He tossed a mouthful of words over one shoulder. "Hey Takis, she can't go to Greece because she doesn't have a passport!"

Laughter shot back from the front of the plane. Awful, terrible, horrendous realization dawned. Takis was the one flying this thing. We were going to die if that idiot was at the wheel.

"You do not need a passport," Stavros said. "Other people, yes. But not in the Makris family."

"What makes us so special?"

More laughter. Real chuckleheads, these guys. They were laughing at everything I said. If they were this hard up for comedy, Greece must be the unfunniest place ever.

"You will find out."

"When?"

Stavros glanced at his watch. "Soon."

Specificity wasn't one of his strengths. Dad used to joke about running on Greek time, and now I was seeing for myself that to Greeks, time could be a nebulous construct.

"Fine," I said. My stomach grumbled, contradicting my mouth.

He shot a surprised look at my midsection. "Was that you?"

"You kidnapped me at dinnertime, before my pizza arrived."

His eyes went wide. "You eat dinner at night?"

"When else would I eat it?"

"Ha-ha-ha. You Americans are very funny." He threw some more words to the front of the plane. "Hey, Takis? In America they eat dinner at night."

"I know. I took Marika and the boys to the Walt Disney World last year. Very uncivilized, eating dinner at night."

Stavros leaned forward, whispered to me. "Takis, always he knows everything. If he does not know, he pretends he knows."

The plane lurched left.

"I heard that," Takis hollered from the cockpit.

Stavros raised his one eyebrow. "See?" He got up, disappeared into either the restroom or the galley. "Are you vegetarian?" he called out.

That answered that question. "No."

"Fish or chicken?"

"Chicken."

"Okay."

While he was doing what he was doing, I stood. That went wrong immediately. *Bam!* I collapsed in a heap in the aisle. The good news was that from the floor I had a better view of the plane.

The plane seated ten. It was lavish in a vaguely gaudy way—too much gold on things that shouldn't be gold. At the rear of the plane was a short pillar with a silver and blue box on top. A religious diorama. Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and some guys I didn't recognize from my vantage point on the floor.

"Do not stand up," Takis called out from the cockpit. "You will fall down."

Too late for that. "What did you give me?"

"It is a secret."

"Hey, you drugged me, bozo. At least be decent enough to tell me what you used."

"It is a secret from me, also. Baboulas tells no one what goes into the potion. All we know is that it makes you sleep."

Huh. I wasn't liking this Baboulas person too much.

Stavros returned carrying a tray. Whatever was on the plate it was

killing me—in a good way. It wasn't chicken or fish. Something like lasagna, but in a different configuration. *Pastitsio*.

"*Pastitsio*," he confirmed. "Baboulas made it for you."

I pushed it away, ignoring the siren call of hot meat and cheesy sauce. It smelled like heaven, but Baboulas had technically drugged me, which meant the food was suspect, no matter how much I wanted to shovel it into my mouth.

"Where's my father? Do you have any idea who took him?"

"We don't know. Baboulas will have some ideas, yes, but we do not know for sure."

"What do you know?"

"Eh," Stavros said. "I know Baboulas' *pastitsio* is the best."

Through the oval window I saw Greece for the first time. Not love at first sight, but close. As we approached the ground, I couldn't help noticing Greece was like an aging drag queen. A thousand feet up in the air, she was magnificent, a swirl of blue and green skirts. But up close her wrinkles were road-shaped and her complexion was looking a little smoggy.

To his credit, Takis didn't totally suck as a pilot. The plane landed without crashing or exploding in a huge fireball.

"Where are we?" I asked as the plane taxied.

Stavros looked at me like I'd lost my marbles. Greeks are very touchy about losing marbles, since Lord Elgin helped himself to the Acropolis's goodies back in the 1800s.

"Greece."

I waved my hand. "I know that. Where in Greece?"

"Volos. A private airstrip."

"Who owns it?"

Takis laughed in the cockpit. "We do!"

The plane rolled to a stop. Not far away on the cracked and faded tarmac a black limo was waiting. It had dark windows and a mirror shine. Fancy.

The driver's side window rolled down as the two goobers escorted me down the steps.

Limousines came with certain expectations: mini bars, sunroofs to projectile vomit through on the way home from prom, and uniformed drivers with leather gloves. This one had a definite lack of uniformed driver. There was a driver behind the wheel, but she was ancient and built like an egg. Stooped shoulders. Iron and white hair beaten back into a face-stretching bun. She wore black like she'd heard they were casting for *The Godfather: Part IV*.

Definitely a widow. Once an older Greek woman's husband dies, that's it. You like colors? Tough cookies, no colors for you. You want colors? Put them on your wall. But if you wear them you're saying, *I whizz on my dead husband*.

The limo driver wasn't whizzing on her dead husband. Not now. Not ever.

She looked me up and down, hand cupped over her eyes, even though it was— I looked back at Larry and Mo. "What time is it?"

"Almost ten. At night." As if that wasn't obvious by the rapidly darkening sky.

—hand cupped over her eyes, even though it was almost ten at night. Then she said, "I thought you would be fatter."

"Fatter than what?" I asked.

"Fatter than Greek girls. Americans are fat, unless they are on TV. Then they are too skinny. Those girls are like bobble-heads. So sad."

"I …" Whatever I was going to say next, it died in my throat and slid back down to wherever unspoken words go.

"You are Katerina, yes?" she continued.

I nodded, because those dying words were blocking the way for new ones.

Her attention slid to the stooges. "Where is Michail?"

Takis prodded me with his finger. "Tell her."

"Why do I have to tell her? *You* abducted *me*."

"No, you tell her," he said. "That's why we brought you."

I summoned up all my indignation, which wasn't all that impressive, frankly. Exhaustion, stress, fear, and a slug of sleeping juice had taken its toll. I wanted to cut a bozo, but not until after a long, hard nap.

Hands on hips, I said, "You drugged and abducted me so I could do your dirty work?"

He shrugged. "Yes."

Ugh. I turned back to the little old granny. "My father was maybe kidnapped by two guys who looked like Italian mobsters."

"Like us," Takis said proudly.

I glared at him. "I need to be at home. Now. If there's a ransom call I need to be there."

"Heh," Stavros said. "She thinks this is *Star Trek*. '*Beam me up, Scotty!*' "

"Wait." I looked from Takis to Stavros and back again. I pointed to Takis. "I thought you were the asshole—not him."

That old woman rocked back and forth in her seat, howling with laughter. "They are both assholes. But in this business you need good assholes. Get in the car, Katerina. These are dangerous times for the family if your father has truly been kidnapped, and I want to get home

fast."

It was a natural reaction, the way I reached for the back door. It was equally natural the way I leaped back when the old woman made a *tst* noise.

"In the front," she barked.

"But …" Takis started.

"You two *malakas* get in the back. I want to look at the girl, okay? You do not like it? Walk."

My abrupt departure from American soil meant I was traveling light. My alleged relatives had packed a small bag I remembered from the back of my closet, and now Takis was stuffing my handbag into my arms. I peeked inside. Tampons. Tampons everywhere.

"In case you are bleeding," he said. "You were in a very bad mood."

My head wanted to explode. "You pushed into my place uninvited. Then you drugged me. Then you abducted me." I ticked off each item on my fingers. "Of course I'm in a bad mood!"

"My Virgin Mary!" the old woman cursed. "You went into her house uninvited? What, are we animals now? Are we the Kefalas family? When do we go into a home uninvited, unless they are an enemy? Never! We are better than that. Apologize."

Two not-that-sorry faces shone back at me from the back seat.

She repeated the order. "Apologize!"

"We are sorry," Takis said.

"Very sorry," Stavros said.

The old woman fixed her dark eyes on my face. "Do they look sorry to you?"

"Not really."

A laugh split her face in two. "Too bad you are my granddaughter, what I need is my son."

My brain sputtered. It wasn't a fan of surprises, and tonight it had been slammed with cream pies, clown-style. My grandmother? How could she be my grandmother? Until this moment I didn't even know I had a grandmother; although biology suggested it was a probability, unless Dad had been spawned in a secret underground laboratory. In the absence of contrary evidence, I was inclined to believe the old woman. She did have a miniature version of Dad's nose glued to the center of her face.

I needed time to process. But first, I needed to hear what this Baboulas person had to say about Dad's possible kidnapping. Then the plan was to throw myself at the mercy of the US Embassy in Athens.

Mind completely boggled, I buckled into the limo's passenger seat, cradling my precious bag o' tampons.

"You are tall," the woman who claimed to be my grandmother said. "I used to be tall. Now look at me."

The chuckleheads in the back seat laughed right on cue.

I'm not that tall. Five-four on a good day, and only in the morning. It's all downhill once gravity kicks in. My alleged grandmother had to be five-foot—at a stretch—judging from how far forward she'd had to scoot the seat. At five-nine my father wasn't a big man, either.

The limo jerked to life. Granny had a heavy foot. The way the black car lurched forward, I was guessing her bones were lead. I shot a glance behind me. Both Stooges had lost all their color. They were gripping the handholds one-handed, frantically crossing themselves with the other.

"God help us," Stavros muttered. "She is not supposed to be driving."

At that, the old woman cackled.

My attention turned to her profile. I'd seen it before on my father's head. Funny, I always assumed he resembled my grandfather. But no, here was the same long, serious nose, same full lips and slightly pointed chin, like some kid mistook her and Dad for Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head, and swapped their bits and pieces. I sagged slightly in the seat.

"So you're really my grandmother?"

"Look at your nose." She leaned over, wheels swerving, and flipped down the sun visor. Predictably, it had a mirror. And sure enough, there was our nose.

"Do you bake cookies?"

"Yes."

"Do you knit?"

"I knit. Also, I crochet and do needlepoint."

It was true, she could be someone's grandma—maybe even mine.

"Do you know anything about my father's potential kidnapping?"

Her gaze flicked to the rearview mirror and the reflection of the penitent men in the seat behind us. "What did you tell her?"

"Nothing," Takis said.

"Almost nothing," Stavros added.

"Which was it? Nothing, or almost nothing? Because those are two very different things."

Smart woman, my grandmother.

"Nothing," Takis affirmed.

"Almost," I said.

Granny glided to a stop. She turned around, shot eye-daggers into the limo's backseat.

Takis held up both hands. "We said maybe the family had some ideas where he was, and this is all, I swear."

My grandmother looked at me. I nodded. Her deadly stink-eye went back into hiding. With a head-snapping jerk, the limo was on the

move again. A sharp, acrid odor wafted over to my quarter of the limo. Smelled like the backside of one of those sad bars where all the customers are live-ins.

"Virgin Mary, help me," Stavros said, eyes closed. "I pissed my pants."

Takis scooted towards the door.

The old woman patted my leg. "He does that all the time."

"It's true," Takis said, head bobbing like a parrot. "All the time. Once we were fighting with drug dealers and he shit his pants."

Stavros threw a punch at his arm. "*Kolotripa*!"

The universal translator in my head—okay, it only worked with Greek and a few words of Spanish, including, but not limited to, food products—ground the insult into palatable English for me. *Kolos* was a butt, *tripa* was a hole.

"Boys." She shook her head. "That is a true story. We tell that one every time the family gets together. Even the drug dealers laugh now when they see Stavros. They call him *Kaka Vrakas*."

Poopy Pants.

Fights with drug dealers? Crapping pants? What I wanted was a saw so I could cut myself out of the family tree. No wonder Dad bolted from these crazies. And I had a horrible, gnawing sort of feeling that this was one of those 'you ain't seen nothing yet' situations.

We were on the move again, limo slicing down the road, tires blistering the blacktop. I'd spent so much time gawking at my idiot cousins that I'd barely had a chance to look outside.

Darkness. More darkness.

And look at that: more darkness. Night had hastily thrown a blanket over the country. This part of Greece, so far, was very dark. But an ancient kind of darkness. That kind that could hide insane gods and bizarro mythical creatures. The way my day was going, I half expected a Minotaur to leap out of the bushes and Hulk smash the limo. The headlights revealed a short stretch of road that looked like something from a horror movie. Gnarled and grumpy trees along the sides reached for us. A faded line marked the center of the road, barely keeping us on course. The road's edges suggested something inhuman had been gnawing on the blacktop.

Then my grandmother said, "Uh-oh, it is the police."

Chapter 3

SURE ENOUGH, the back window was filled with dancing red, white, and blue lights. It was disco central up in here.

Grandma jerked to a neck-snapping stop. "No license," she said. "Quick, swap seats."

The person she said it to was me.

Me.

"I don't have a Greek license."

"But you have a license, yes?"

"Yes."

"Okay," she said. "It is good. Move."

No, not good. In what way was this anything except bad? My driving record was virginal, untouched by parking tickets, speeding tickets, and DUIs. One of those little voices inside me often liked to lip off about how traffic violations were a gateway drug to more serious crimes.

But I slid over anyway, because I remembered Grandma's deadly glare. Family ties seemed to be fastened in loose bows around here, not tight knots. She could kill me with a withering gaze and not even miss me. I knew her about as well as any random religious proselytizer who came banging on my door.

For the record, I was always nice to them. Partly because I believe in stacking the deck in my favor. While I'm not tight with God—or even sure He's (or She's) a thing—it doesn't hurt to be decent to everyone, just in case He's waiting to rubber stamp my exodus to hell. The other part of me is nice to them because you just never know if they're unhinged. These are people who believe we can sit in a garden paradise and break bread with lions, tigers, and bears. Maybe the bears could be bought off with the bread, I didn't know, but I was pretty sure lions and tigers preferred their meat hot, fresh, and yelling for backup. While I was being nice, I reminded them that I was doing them a favor, saving their organization money by saying no to their paper goods.

Grandma hadn't tried to sell me on anything yet, but our fledgling relationship had the solidity of quicksand. And me, I'd had a childhood fear of quicksand. They made it out to be such a huge deal in those days. As an adult, I still expected it to be like spiders: they say you're never more than three, six, or ten feet ('they' are fuzzy on the math) away from a spider, at any given moment. Every day I didn't

step in quicksand was a mild shock.

My grandmother was surprisingly spry. She scrambled past me and buckled herself in while I was trying to get a grip on the situation. While I was doing that, a policeman swaggered up to the window, tapped on the glass with his big stick.

Using one finger, I rolled down the window and tried to be cool. "Can I help you?"

He crouched until he was at eye level. I immediately recoiled, because who looked like that? I mean, who looked like that outside of a magazine? Nature doesn't normally Photoshop people, but it Photoshopped this guy. He looked big and bad and delicious buttoned into the pale blue shirt of his police uniform. The bottom half was navy blue. Each epaulet on his shoulders was marked with a six-pointed silver star. He was maybe five-eleven or six-foot. Dark hair with a wave that probably turned unruly fast without a regular clipping. Skin the color of melted caramels. His eyes were a soft brown that were clearly entertained.

"Can I help *you*?" he asked.

Laughter came from the passenger seat. "Stay out of my granddaughter's pants, eh, Nikos?"

That charming smile melted away. He glanced from her to me and back again.

"Your granddaughter, *Kyria* Makri? Since when?"

"Since my son ran away to America and had sex with an American woman."

"Hey," I said. "They were married."

"In the Greek church?" my grandmother asked.

Uh … "No." Not big on ceremony, they'd thrown a quickie wedding at the courthouse, followed by a boozy reception at a brewhouse.

"Then it was not a real marriage, but that is okay, you are still my granddaughter."

The two goons in the back were quiet—real quiet.

"What do you want, Nikos?" Grandma asked.

He shrugged, gaze stuck to my face like sun-warmed gum. "I heard a story that you were out zooming around the streets of Volos without a license."

"Who was zooming?" She glanced around the limo's very nice, very fancy interior. "Only Katerina was driving, and she is a very slow driver. Americans," she said, waving one hand. "They drive like old women."

Not like this old woman, I thought. Grandma could go NASCAR if she wanted.

"Where is Xander?" he asked.

"Busy."

Officer Nikos, Constable Nikos—whatever—rapped his knuckles on the car door. "Okay. Do you need a police escort?"

"What for?" Grandma asked.

He shrugged. I could sit here and watch him shrug all night long. What the movement did to his shoulders was intoxicating.

"Word is these are difficult times," he said.

"Times are always difficult."

"Especially difficult, then."

Grandma wagged a finger. "Nikos, Nikos. You are a good boy. Go home, drink a beer, watch some TV. Think about getting married and having a family."

His gaze cut to me.

"*Tsk.* Not my granddaughter. Someone else. I have plans for her."

Wait—what? My mouth opened to launch a protest, but the old buzzard chose that moment to lean forward and pat the policeman's hand. She timed it perfectly with a sharp elbow to my gut. A clear and present *shut-up*.

"If you're sure …" he started.

"Of course. Go home. Do not worry about an old woman."

He flashed me a smile. My chest did this involuntary thing where it tried to evict my heart via my throat.

"*Yia sou*," I said (*Yia sou* is multifunctional. It's the *aloha* of Greek), but by the time it came out he was out of earshot.

Takis made kissy noises in the back seat. "*Yia sou*, Nikos."

"Enough!" my grandmother barked.

I tapped the gas—hard—then slammed the brake. Takis lurched forward, spilling onto the limo's floor. As skinny as he was, he collapsed like a pile of coat hangers.

Grandma cackled. "Yes, I like you very much, Katerina. You remind me of me."

Somewhere down the road we played musical seats. Takis drove the rest of the way, at a speed bordering on coma, while I was relegated to the back with Stavros.

"Don't touch me," I said.

Grandma glanced back. "If he is a problem, he can get in the trunk."

I was starting to like her, too.

This was a first, having a grandmother. Mom's mother was a witch who took the express train to hell when Mom was a newlywed. After condemning my mother to a childhood without junk food, my maternal grandmother choked to death on Peanut M&M's. My

grandfather blew his aorta one morning, screaming at a neighbor's crapping dog. The mutt—a Great Dane—decided Granddad's newspaper was the perfect place to unload the memory of past meals. I was seven at the time. No big loss. Granddad was a firm believer that children should sit up, shut up, and eat up. Even Mom was kind of relieved when he keeled over for one last mouthful of sod.

Dad's parents were a mystery. Not just any mystery—they were a mystery stashed in a safe, buried pirate-style on some remote island. And there was no handy map with an X on it that I could ever find. I'd looked. Half my childhood I spent looking for clues about Dad's past. Turned out all I needed to do was wait for him to disappear, and then his family would drug me, throw me onto a private jet, and whisk me away to Greece. If only I'd known it was that easy.

The limo was cruising uphill. The road was weaving and tilting, so Takis had no choice but to hug its curves and hope for a non-fatal outcome.

"Where are we going?"

"To my home," Grandma said.

"Where's that?"

"Up on Mount Pelion."

Mount Pelion—if you look at a map—is Greece's prehensile tail, located in Central Greece. It's got the Aegean Sea at the back of its peninsula, and the bulk of the tail curls around the Pagasetic Gulf. The port city of Volos sits on Pelion's foot. Don't ask me how many hours I've spent poring over maps of Greece; if they were billable I'd be sitting on a tall stack of greenbacks. Google said the mountain was splotched with tiny villages. It also said Pelion used to be home to Jason and his Argonauts, and the centaurs. Mythological events that transpired on Pelion lead to the Trojan War.

The place was oozing with history that may or may not have happened.

Which village were we headed for? Hard to say in the dark. Somewhere along the way, Takis turned the limousine off the main road and onto a narrower capillary showered with dirt and rocks. The headlamps were focused on the road, but some of the light bled over onto trees crowding sidelines. Unlike the trees on the main road these ones stood at attention, dutiful, vigilant soldiers.

"Nice road," I said.

My grandmother made a face. "We could have it paved, but a dirt and rock road is a good early warning system if someone is coming."

"Like who, the Persians?"

Grandma glanced at Takis who flicked a look in the mirror at Stavros.

"Company," Takis said.

Before I could squeeze an explanation out of any of them, the limousine shone light on a tall set of iron gates, the big, fancy curlicued kind that usually meant a mansion or insane asylum was on the other side. It was attached to a tall wall. Solid. Made of rocks piled on other rocks, and frosted with mortar so the whole stack would stick together for something close to eternity. Just outside the gate there was one of those little guardhouses, and in it, a guard.

I raised my eyebrow. "The White House?"

Takis looked in the mirror. "Yes, the house is white. How did you know?"

I slid down in the seat. Never mind. Some things were just destined to be lost in translation.

He grunted, rolled the window down, inched up to the guardhouse. Up close I could see a smaller door built into the wall, for foot traffic in and out.

The guard was built like somebody had grafted a lowercase b onto a p. His uniform was trying to do the decent thing, but it was running into trouble around midsection. A small flatscreen television had him captivated.

"Did you get him?" He spat the words out of the corner of his mouth, along with a spray of sunflower seed.

"No." Takis hooked his thumb at the backseat. "We got her."

The guard peered in. "Nice." Then he pushed a button and the gates parted. They weren't pearly, but I had to admit I was pretty impressed.

Behind the gate and wall there was a house. A lot of house. And Takis was right, it was white. A big box of a place, porch wrapped around both floors. Dead center there was a massive stone archway where a front door would normally be. To the right of that, a long stretch of garage doors.

"That is the family house," Grandma said. "Much of the family lives here—and some of our employees."

"Cool," I said. "Do I get my own room?" Not that I was staying. I had to find Dad.

Grandma glanced back at me. "Not in the big house. You will stay with me."

Did I look bewildered? I felt it. "Don't you live here?"

Takis looked at me in the rearview mirror. He grinned. Lots of teeth. Some of them were even straight.

The ground was flagstone, the fountain marble, the gardens—what I could see of them—well-tended to an obsessive compulsive degree. Two stone lions flanked the archway, one sitting, the other lying down. On the far side of each big cat sat a tall cactus in a bright red pot, offshoots reminding me of bent and broken fingers.

This was the end of the line. Takis cut the engine, jumped out and rushed around to get my grandmother's door.

Stavros looked at me, his expression wary. "You want me to get your door?"

"I've got it, thanks."

He shot me a relieved smile.

I got out of the car, death grip on my handbag and its overflowing sanitary products. "Are we going to see Baboulas now?"

All eyes swiveled in my direction. They stuck to my face like those face-hugging creatures in *Alien*.

"Where did you hear that name?" Grandma asked in a casual, passive sort of voice, the kind one often hears moments before they're pushed out the penthouse window of a thirty-story building.

"From my father. And from them. They said Baboulas might know who took Dad." Both men were frantically waving their hands behind her in a, *No, no, don't!* fashion.

Her lips pressed together, hardening along with the rest of her face. Her wrinkles became deadly ravines, and I half expected her black eyes to shoot lasers, obliterating my cousins.

"No," she said in a voice dripping acid. "We are not going to see Baboulas. I am Baboulas. How can I go and see myself, eh?"

My jaw unhinged itself for a moment, then snapped back into place, trapping a chunk of my tongue between its teeth. Tears rushed to my eyes as I beat back the string of curse words.

"You're the boogeyman?" I asked.

"If that is the creature that hides under your bed and in your closet, waiting until you are asleep before it snatches you away, then yes."

"You don't look like the boogeyman."

"Oh?" She raised both eyebrows. "Have you seen the boogeyman before?"

"No." But I was pretty sure I heard it heavy breathing under my bed once.

"Then you are obviously an authority on the subject, yes?"

"I used to be a kid. That means I'm completely qualified to talk boogeyman."

My grandmother laughed and looped her arm through mine. "I like you. I hope nobody kills you, because I am not a big fan of revenge. Always it is complicated."

Fear tiptoed over me, carrying a large rock under one arm. One slip and—*CRACK*—my nerves would shatter. "Why would anyone want to kill me?" Besides the fact that it was my job to gently arm-twist people into paying their debts.

She shrugged. "Business."

"What business is that?"

"Michail never told you?"

All those stories Dad spun over my bed when I was a kid flooded back. Like the one about Baboulas washing gold coins in the river so nobody would know where it originated; or the one about Baboulas ripping the top off a boat with its claws, and stealing the bottled water; or the story about Baboulas climbing Mount Olympus to threaten the gods with destruction if they didn't lower capital gains taxes.

In hindsight, his boogeyman wasn't a closet-dweller, but a person. And that person looked nothing like my grandmother. Every kid knew the boogeyman wasn't a black-clad Oompa Loompa. Even now, looking at her I couldn't help wondering if she was going to break into song and dance, warning me about my character flaws.

"Maybe he did." My forehead scrunched. "I'm not sure."

"Like anybody, I am in the business of making money, Katerina. Maintaining and expanding the business my husband—your grandfather—and I worked so hard for. Now he is no longer with us, except in a container I keep the kitchen."

"Why the kitchen?"

"The kitchen is where I do business. People come to talk with me, to ask for favors and blessings, and maybe eat a little of my *baklava*. Yiannis said it was the best in Greece—even better than his mother's, and that woman … *po-po*, that was a woman who could cook."

"What kind of business?"

"A little of this, a little of that. Same as any good businessperson."

Very specific, my grandmother.

"That way." Takis nodded to the arch cut into the cement-rendered house. He took the vanguard position, while Stavros took the rear. Between them, Grandma and I were the sandwich fillings. Possibly they were making sure I didn't run away.

Which wasn't happening while these people—family or not—could potentially point me towards Dad. I was going home, but not until I'd squeezed every ounce of information out of them. As soon as twenty-four hours were up, I was calling the Portland Police Bureau, then the feds, ransom demand or not.

The arch opened into a huge courtyard. Now I could see that the front of the house was just one side of a square. Not so much a house as it was a massive compound, a giant palace of a place, with gardens and a conservatory and fountains. The only thing missing was an elaborate hedge maze.

Everything looked amazing, until my eyes snagged on the dive that sat dead center of the courtyard, the fly in the sugar-riffic cake frosting.

The rickety square box had been renovated sometime in the past to tack on a dog's hind leg. The main building itself was white stucco; the addition, neatly stacked stones, mortar slapped between them to hold the whole thing together. Someone had tacked a metal fence around the whole mess. Probably it was a hazardous zone. An optimist would call it a house. A pessimist would call it a Godforsaken dump. Me, I was just a guest here—I wasn't calling it anything until I knew what it was, for sure.

"That is my house …" Grandma said.

Oh.

"… and you will stay there with me."

Yeah, no. That thing couldn't be up to code. It was already on the verge of condemnation. What happened when the Earth got to shaking the way Earth does here? Greece was Earthquake Central.

"Uh …" I started.

"My house is the safest place in the country. Nobody uninvited can get in there without a swift death."

Well, that was vampires taken care of, but what about people? One fat sparrow and that roof was going bye-bye.

"Goodnight," Takis said. Stavros waved for both of them.

"Where are you guys going?" I asked.

Takis smirked. "Heh. We are going home."

"Where's home?"

He pointed to the far left corner on the top floor. "Here, of course. Me, my fat wife, and our children. Stavros lives down there."

Bottom floor.

"Bachelors' quarters," Stavros said glumly.

Then the bastards deserted me.

Grandma led me to her house of straw and sticks. "This is the house your great-great-grandparents bought when they were first married."

I nodded, hoping the noise I made was a polite one.

"After your grandfather and I married, your great-grandparents moved into the big house so we could live here."

Very generous of them. What did they do to the kids they hated?

"It is a tradition," she continued. "The eldest child lives here, and then their eldest child."

Chilled water began a slow pour through my veins. "Who's your eldest child?"

She looked at me. "Your father has told you nothing about your family?"

"He told me about Baboulas. Does that count?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Yes, that he told you. Very indiscreet."

"I was a kid."

"And now, as a woman, you still remember his stories."

I nodded.

"Like I said," she continued, "indiscreet."

She pushed through the metal gate. The fence sat atop a concrete footing about six inches tall. Inside the fence the ground was smooth concrete. Plants everywhere, all in pots painted red. Not a subtle red, but an *IN YOUR FACE BECAUSE I AM RED* shade of red.

The front door wasn't locked.

"Nobody locks their doors here," she told me.

"Well, it's not like a stranger could just walk in, right?"

"I mean in this part of Greece. In the city, yes, but in the villages? Not unless a person is very paranoid. And I am not paranoid about my front door."

Doors … maybe not. But I had the stomach-sinking, throat-gripping feeling that Grandma was super-duper paranoid about other things. More dangerous things. Come on, this was a woman nicknamed after the boogeyman. We're not talking complete sanity here. I really hoped it wasn't a dominant gene.

Grandma's place was a dump, inside and out. A clean dump—but a dump is a dump is a dump. The grand tour lasted fifteen seconds. Bedroom (hers), bedroom (mine—allegedly), a big cupboard between bedrooms, kitchen, living room, and two-thirds of a bathroom.

I scratched my head, wondering where she'd stashed the missing piece of the puzzle. "Where's the toilet?"

"Outside."

"Outside?"

"Outside."

I stalked over to the kitchen window, flung the shutters open, shoved my head outside. Sure enough, the toilet was outside. In an outhouse.

An *outhouse*.

"No indoor toilet?"

"What for? I have a good toilet."

Good was subjective.

I fell into one of the kitchen chairs to contemplate the situation. Right now every angle looked the same shade of bad.

The kitchen was marginally less awful than the rest of the place. A generous counter, an archaic oven with a pipe running overhead, all the way to the outside wall, and a big slab of a table with six chairs. The refrigerator was pre war—though I wasn't sure which war. One of the early ones. It had a lift-and-pull handle. I squinted at the bottles lined up on the windowsill.

"Which one is Granddad?"

She pointed out an olive oil tin with a photograph taped to the

front. The subject was a middle-aged male with a lush black pelt on his head. He was wearing a three-piece suit and his eyes were shut.

"Aww," I said. "He's sleeping."

"The photographer took that at his funeral. That is not his real hair."

Yikes.

When I recovered I said, "Why the toupee?"

"He wanted to look his best for God."

Was a sit-down with the Big Kahuna a sure thing for any member of this family? It was looking a whole lot like, *No*.

"You want coffee?" Grandma asked.

"At this time of night?" She gave me one of those looks reserved for annoying grandkids and other pains in the ass. "Okay, just one cup. Please."

She heaped finely ground coffee into a tiny long-handled pot. Then she lit a match, touching it to one of those gas cookers people take camping. The coffee was done when the pot started to boil and the foam rushed to top. She divided the coffee between two cups that belonged in a dollhouse. I knew coffee, and that was barely enough for a minor caffeine tingle.

"Something to eat, eh? A little something sweet?"

Now she was speaking my language. "Yes, please!" I might have whimpered.

At my sudden burst of enthusiasm she chuckled and lifted the glass dome lid on a cake stand sitting on the counter.

Baklava. I'd know that nut and pastry confection anywhere. The layers of phyllo start out crispy, and then slowly drown as the honey syrup seeps in.

"You like the syrup, eh?"

"It's the best part."

Another chuckle as she spooned a diabetes-inducing waterfall of syrup over the diamond-shaped slice, with a single clove stuck in its center. "That is the best part."

The *baklava* was otherworldly, but the Greek coffee kicked my butt back to Earth. So much for a minor buzz—this stuff could punch Starbucks in the throat.

"Why did you send Takis and Stavros to get my father?"

"My reasons are my own," she said. "But trust me, they are very good reasons."

Oh. Well. That changed everything, didn't it? "Where's my father?"

"If I knew that he would be here."

"Why am I here? Takis and Stavros brought the wrong Makris. You could have made them send me home."

"I want you here so I can protect you."

"From?"

"Whoever is responsible for your father's abduction."

"Our next-door neighbor saw them. He said they looked like mobsters."

She scoffed. "Everybody in the abduction business looks like a mobster. What else would they look like?"

I thought about it for a moment. "I guess I'd try to look like I fit in."

"Good idea," she said. "I will consider that."

Things were looking shadier by the minute. "Who do you think took him?"

She shrugged, but it was no casual move. There was a weight on her shoulders, and that's when I remembered my father was her child; she had to be worried sick, even if she had a face like an Easter Island moai.

"If I say names they will be guesses. I cannot do anything with a guess."

A long sigh escaped me. "Then I have to go home."

"And do what?"

"Call the police, the FBI, the CIA, Homeland Security. Whoever it takes to find Dad. Then after he's found, go to sleep in my new apartment, and get up and go to work."

A funny shadow tiptoed across her face.

Uh-oh. "What?"

"It was a terrible accident. Okay, two terrible accidents. Very coincidental. First your work burned down, then your boss fell down some stairs and broke his legs."

"Both those things?"

"Yes."

"What a coincidence."

"Yes. But your boss is a little bit of a criminal, and not a successful one at that."

"Huh. They say stuff like that comes in threes. Anything else you want to tell me?"

She shrugged. "Maybe your apartment building burned down, too."

My breath was coming out in short huffs. My brain was screaming, *FOR GOD'S SAKE WOMAN, RUN*.

"Maybe my apartment building burned down? I hadn't even moved in yet! What about the people who live there? What about my deposit?"

"How much?"

When I told her she left the table and reached into one of the kitchen drawers, pulling out a thick roll of euros. She peeled off several notes, pushed them to my side of the table.

"The people are all fine. Nobody was hurt."

No crime, I thought, remembering my father's words. Which was funny, because it was looking a whole lot like my family *was* crime around here.

"Thanks," I said.

She came around to my side of the table, kissed me on both cheeks. "Get some sleep, Katerina. We will talk more tomorrow."

When I woke up during the night, nothing had changed. I was in my grandmother's second bedroom, with its rustic furniture and shuttered windows. The curtains were sheer, the sheets were white, and the walls were a gag-a-rrific shade of green. One single bed, two bedside tables that started life as crates, and a lamp with a naked bulb to complete the picture. I needed to pee, and if I didn't want to pop, the place I had to pee was outside, in a wood hut. Like a civilized savage.

Using my super-stealth skills, I tiptoed down the narrow hall and tried to avoid a sudden onslaught of claustrophobia.

I've never been claustrophobic (or any kind of phobic, unless you count spiders, snakes, ringworm, Ebola, head lice, venereal diseases, hornets, and—for some weird reason—geese) but I was developing a case of it here in the dark. By the time I burst outside, I was covered in a thin layer of cold sweat.

Tweedledumb and Tweedledumber had packed a bag, yeah, but the essentials were missing. No pajamas. No nightgown. The only thing they had for me to sleep in was a *Keep Portland Weird* T-shirt and packet of underwear I won in a Secret Santa three Christmases ago. My size, but they were dotted with cats and cutesy phrases about pussy. So that's what I was wearing to my middle-of-the-night sojourn.

The stars were strangers here. Configurations altered just a hair, brighter shine. Back home we were so busy shining our own lights in their eyes that they'd become duller over time—when they were there at all. But here on Mount Pelion they had gathered to watch me sneak to the outhouse. *Check out the American chick in the cat undies. This should be hil-a-ri-ous*, I imagined them whispering.

Yes, very funny. I'd jumped from indoor plumbing and air-conditioning to something slightly more current than a cave, with suitable bushes near the entrance. A bush would be better, in some ways. With a bush there's no pretense. An outhouse is just a bunch of bushes with ambition but no real skill.

The air was warm and lightly scented with something I didn't recognize. Some kind of flower. Delicate, slightly sweet. Candy. My stomach grumbled. There was a hint of chlorine, too. Somewhere nearby there was a swimming pool.

I held my breath for a moment. Listened. Heard the faint slosh, slosh of someone cutting through the pool water's surface.

Someone else was up.

My burning desire to pee subsided. Bathroom performance anxiety; what if the swimmer heard me tinkle?

I crept along the side of the house, past the wretched outhouse. Potted bushes and trees obscured the view, but I had hands, didn't I? Yes, and they did a half-assed job of pushing the slender branches aside. Those things might have looked thin, but they were made of some kind of semi-bendy steel. They bit and slapped at my arms. I fought back—and hard. Triffids would never get the best of me.

The night swimmer was male. He was tall and big, but solid. The kind of solidity you find in walls and concrete blocks. Broad sloping shoulders, carved out of bronze. Dark hair slicked back with pool water. Face like a pretty-boy with an extra ten years on his odometer to sharpen his soft edges. When he turned, I saw his back was a river of scars.

He grabbed a towel off one of the deck chairs, started drying himself off. My motor started to rumble. Between work and watching television, it had been a while between sexual escapades.

Then I mentally slapped my forehead. Ugh. What the heck was I thinking? The compound was for family and a few employees—but mostly family. Which meant there was a serious chance I was separated from Adonis there by a few pointy twigs—at best—on the ol' family tree.

There were laws against drooling over a cousin. Although, maybe not in Greece. I didn't know what their incest laws covered—brothers and sisters, maybe—but at home there was a serious ick factor involved if you share the same chin.

On my hands and knees, I backed away from the bushes, from the fence, from potential birth defects in any future offspring.

Then I stopped.

Not my fault. Something was blocking me. Instinct kicked me in the guts, forcing me to act. I rolled over onto my back, limbs flailing. Just my luck: my flight-or-fight made me go belly-up like a cockroach. A bear would have been better.

Thanks, brain. After all I've done for you.

"Argh," I whimpered. It was meant to be a scream, but it lost serious weight on the way out.

Standing over me was Pool Guy. He was bigger up close. A fraction older than me—early 30s. I wasn't normally intimidated by hot foreign guys, but this one had two big guns, and the metal one was pointed right at me.

"I'm Katerina Makris." The words whooshed out. "The old woman

who lives there—" I shook a shaking finger at the shack. "—is my grandmother."

Not a word out of the guy. He took in my T-shirt, my cat-covered underwear, then he lowered the gun. He offered me his hand. My pride wouldn't let me touch it.

"Thanks, but I can do it," I said. "It probably doesn't look like it, but I get up off the ground all the time. I do yoga." No—no yoga. Not in my past or present. I rolled over first, mooning him with my cats, then hauled myself to my feet. Very graceful—more rhino than swan. When I turned around—*poof!*—he had vanished.

Weird. I peered behind the bushes, peeked over the fence, but he'd done a bunk. Not my bladder, though. It was back, and it wanted to know why I was standing around, jiggling.

It's okay, I told myself. Pool Guy probably wasn't on the other side of the fence, watching me limp into the outhouse.

Chapter 4

GRANDMA INSPECTED me as I shlepped into the kitchen barefoot. Morning's thin light was doing her all kinds of favors. It softened her wrinkles, knocking at least six months off her age.

"Where are your shoes?"

"All I have are boots. What's wrong with bare feet?"

She dropped what she was doing and disappeared into her bedroom. When she returned it was with slippers. She dumped them at my feet. "Put them on." Then she nodded to the rest of me. "Did you get into a fight with a cat?"

"Bushes," I said.

"Which bushes?"

"The ones at the back."

"What were you doing in the bushes, eh?"

"Checking out the view."

"Of what? It was night."

"I didn't realize you have a pool."

"Katerina, my love, I have everything—even a plane or two."

Or two? "There was a guy out there swimming. In the middle of the night. Who does that?"

"What did he look like?"

"Greek."

She went to the pantry, hauled out a sack of flour. I went to lift it for her but she shooed me away. "You would make a terrible police witness."

"I know. It's a curse." I was like that old *MadTV* skit: *He look-a like-a man.*

Footsteps interrupted the conversation. The screen door swung open and in walked a conundrum. I always felt bad when I couldn't figure out which pronoun to use, especially when using the wrong one could hurt someone's feelings. The hair and makeup said woman; biology said dude.

"This is Rita," Grandma said. "My youngest son. He's a *travesti*, as you can see."

The English-Greek lexicon in my head failed me. Was *travesti* a cross-dresser or transgender? It was a muddy puddle I didn't want to jump into, so I went with woman until Dad's sibling corrected me.

Aunt Rita grabbed me by the shoulders, stamped hot pink kisses on both my cheeks. "Katerina! I am your Aunt Rita!"

Well, that took care of that. Aunt Rita it was.

"You have come to see us at last! And look at you, you are beautiful!"

No sooner had the compliment left her lips than she began dry spitting to ward away the evil eye.

Generally speaking, the evil eye floated around hunting down compliments. It was like that one skanky acquaintance every woman has in high school or college, the one who can't handle anyone else scoring male attention. So the minute you excused yourself to go to the restroom, she'd pounce and offer your potential date a BJ.

Where there were compliments, there was the evil eye. And like that one skanky chick, it would stick around if you didn't spit on it.

Aunt Rita was a looker. Sequined hot pants and a ruffled blouse tied around her midriff. The shoes were ejected out of the seventies, landing in Greece, 2014. A cake decorator had gone crazy with her face, frosting her angles with pink blush and gold sparkly shadow. On her left forearm, a green-blue anchor had moored itself to her skin.

I squinted at the tattoo. "Were you in the navy?"

"Yes," she said, sounding like her voice got chained to the back of a pickup truck and dragged for ten miles over gravel, through an Adam's apple. "But only for the guns and the men." Grandma said nothing, but her lips mashed together and her hands got busy scooping flour into an earthenware bowl. "Do you like it?"

"It's very evocative of the ocean," I said.

Aunt Rita pulled me back into her personal-sized cloud of Opium with a chest-bumping thud. What did she have in there—rocks? Impressive. "Your father is my favorite person," she said. "How is he? When will he come to see us, eh?"

"I don't know how he is," I said, feeling teary, not just from the perfume. "He was kind of kidnapped yesterday."

She pulled back. "Kidnapped! By who?"

"I don't know."

She looked at Grandma, perfectly plucked eyebrows raised. "Mama?"

Grandma shrugged over the sugar bag. "Maybe I have my suspicions."

"Why would they kidnap Michail?" my aunt asked.

"About that I have my suspicions, too."

Aunt Rita held out the chair for me. Old habits must die hard. We both sat and watched my grandmother hand-beat sugar and butter into oblivion. A little voice told me that Grandma was the kind of person who ponied up information when she was good and ready, and not a minute sooner.

After a few moments of silence, Aunt Rita reached for my hand.

"Tell me," she said, "are you married?"

Grandma stopped beating for a moment. "Is there a ring on her finger? No. No ring on her finger."

"How old are you?" Aunt Rita asked me.

"Twenty-eight."

My aunt nodded. "Mama will find you a rich man."

"I don't want a rich man. I want a good one."

She thought about it for a moment. "Mama doesn't know any of those."

"Why you not married, eh?" Grandma asked.

Long story, abrupt ending. It's not every day you catch your fiancé facedown on a penis. He ripped out my heart and stomped all over my self-esteem, but I'd moved on. Now when I thought about that moment, mostly I was concerned he gave better head than me.

"I was engaged for a while. Then he tripped and fell on a dick. Repeatedly."

"Honey," my aunt said, "I know the feeling."

"I caught him in action." I gestured at my neck. "It was stuck down the back of his throat, like a fish bone."

My aunt nodded like she knew that, too. "Men are animals," she said. "I should know because I am one." Her attention shifted back to Grandma. "Who do you think took Michail?"

"Maybe Baby Dimitri."

"That *skouliki*."

I didn't know the man, so I couldn't say if he was a worm or not. Talking to him sounded like a good start, though. Grandma must have had a middle-of-the-night revelation. I bolted back to my temporary room, tugged on jeans, snatched up my handbag—evicting the million and one sanitary products—and shoved my feet into boots.

Back in the kitchen I said, "So let's go get him."

Grandma looked me up and down. "Oh? And how will you do that?"

"Ask."

"Ask!" Her whole body shook. "Ask," she said to Aunt Rita.

Aunt Rita shrugged. "It's not the worst idea I have ever heard—"

Exactly. I performed a mental fist pump.

"—but it's close."

My euphoria plunged off a cliff.

"Katerina," Grandma said. "What do you think will happen if you walk up to the front door and ask if your father is there?"

"They'll either say yes or no. If they say yes, I'll negotiate."

Grandma was looking at me like I was high. "What makes you think you have what they want?"

"What makes you think I don't? Dad's been in America for thirty

years, I know him better than you do."

She reached over to the phone hanging on the wall, picked up the receiver, punched a number. "Xander, come to the house. Katerina needs an escort."

"Who is Xander and where are we going?"

"Xander will take you to see Baby Dimitri," Grandma said. "Baby Dimitri is a Godfather of the Night."

"Godfather of the Night?" A horrible feeling was bubbling inside me. "This isn't a religious thing, is it?"

"Godfathers are very religious. They go to church like it is their job. No one prays harder, gives more money, or throws better funerals."

I had a sneaky feeling Grandma was talking about organized crime. But weren't Godfathers a Sicilian and Italian-American thing?

"How do you fit into this?" I asked her.

"Me? I am just an old woman rolling pastry in my kitchen."

Yeah, right.

I turned to my aunt. "What do Godfathers of the Night do?

"Nightclubs, prostitutes, protection, smuggling, racketeering, and the purchase of bureaucrats. You name it, they do it."

"Drugs?"

"Drugs, of course. Greece's Godfathers are always fighting about drugs. Terrible."

There was no time to squeeze my aunt for more information because there were footsteps outside the door. When the door swung open, I got a face full of bare chest.

Okay, so there was a man attached, but … that chest. A mile of it, tan and smooth and chiseled out of marble.

It wasn't just me: Aunt Rita was fanning herself with her hand. "My Virgin Mary," she muttered.

Grandma rolled her eyes. "My God, you two, it is just Xander. Xander, put a shirt on before these two pass out." She nodded to me. "This is my granddaughter, Katerina. Xander works for the family."

My gaze worked its way up to his face. It was Pool Guy. My incest theory went up in smoke. Our children would be fine. Hallelujah!

"We've met," I said.

Xander said nothing. It seemed like he did that a lot.

"When did you meet?" Aunt Rita asked, resting her chin in her palm.

"Last night or this morning. I was in the bushes."

Xander's smirk was small but present. I changed the subject—fast. "Why do they call him Baby Dimitri?"

"Because he is the youngest of his father's children," Grandma told me.

"And he's the boss?"

Grandma set aside the mixing bowl. "His other siblings are all dead."

"How?"

"You ask too many questions, Katerina. Go with Xander. If you have a problem he will help you. Xander, keep an eye on my granddaughter, eh?"

Progress. Finally.

Between Grandma's kitchen and the compound's arched entrance, Xander didn't find a shirt. It was just him and his shorts and some kind of slip on shoes that passed for fashionable around here. He swaggered on ahead, silent except for the slap of his soles on stone. His scars moved silently with him, a golden waterfall gushing from his shoulders to someplace below his waist. Whatever he'd suffered it had been brutal.

The compound was hopping. Music pouring out open windows, shutters thrown wide. Up on the balconies, mothers were performing light chores while their children ran wild in the courtyard. From the direction of the swimming pool, the water was making sounds as though *Jaws* was experiencing an ill-fated meeting with *Orca: The Killer Whale*. Besides family, the compound was home to an assortment of cats and dogs. The cats ignored me. Like most cats they only wanted friends with benefits, and they weren't sure what the benefits of being friends with me were yet. The dogs, being dogs, weren't picky. They got right down to the, *Hey, how ya doing? Got any spare pats/snacks/toys in those pockets*? With a dog you know where you stand. With a cat all you know is where you can't sit.

On the far side of the archway a motorcycle was waiting. A big, black beast of a bike. Sitting atop it were two helmets: one black to match the motorcycle, the other pink.

"Cool. I bet you look great in pink." I reached for the black, but Xander snatched it away. Before I had a chance to grab it he shoved the pink helmet down over my head.

He gave me two unsarcastic—not even remotely ironic—thumbs up, ala the Fonz.

"Before I get on that thing, aren't you going to put on a shirt?"

He looked at me like my picnic was several sandwiches short.

"What if you take a corner too quickly and …" I smacked my palms together. "… *Bam*?"

His expression said, *No bam. Not today. Not ever*.

Arms folded. "It could happen."

Silence.

"Do you ever talk?"

He shrugged.

"Okay, so if you won't talk to me, at least put some clothes on. I'll wait right here."

Face still passive, he picked me up under the armpits, dumped me on the motorcycle. Then the earth moved beneath me as he straddled the behemoth. It was a lean, mean, European machine, nothing like an American hog. No telltale *potato-potato*, just a wild roar that said pedestrians better walk faster or get right with God. He reached back, grabbed my hands, curled them around his waist.

It was like snugging up to a sun-warmed boulder. Only a sun-warmed boulder didn't have the power to kick my hormones up to eleven.

Concentrate on something else, for crying out loud. Shouldn't be too difficult. I was in Greece, for crying out loud. For the first time in my life I was out of the United States and in one of those places I'd only seen on maps, calendars, or a friend's Instagram feed.

This was my first look at Greece with its light on up in the sky, and man, she was one good-looking broad. There was no other word for it. Greece was old school and old-fashioned and just plain old. But there was a certain class to the way the trees twisted up out of the ground. The sky was bluer, clearer, and closer.

How high up were we anyway?

The motorcycle burst out from behind a long stretch of trees, and now I was getting an eyeful of the gulf. It couldn't make up its mind if it wanted to be blue or green, so it was doing both.

How high up? Pretty damn high.

"Wow," I yelled, but the word blew away.

The motorcycle sped up.

Xander stopped outside a blue and orange souvenir-shop-slash-shoe-store in one of the Pagasetic Gulf's seaside villages. The establishment sat directly across the road from the water. Its neighbors were in similar states of nonchalance about the overabundance of available decorating products, like paint in tasteful colors. The window was cluttered with a mix of shoes, T-shirts, and statues of the Greek gods and various other naked people. A rainbow of espadrilles hung over the door and down both sides, all of them tied to a rope by their ribbons.

"Shoes and souvenirs? That's bold yet fruity."

Xander shrugged. He adjusted the low-slung waist of his cargo

shorts, giving me an eyeful of the gun he had stowed there.

Whoa! My eyes bugged. "A gun, seriously? Why do you need a gun? This is just a friendly visit. I'm a diplomat, not a soldier, or … or … whatever it is you are!"

Not a word from the guy made of stone. Hand on my waist, he steered me through the open door.

Three men were sitting inside in a semicircle of craptastic chairs from some bygone era. Two of the guys were probably born around the time King Leonidas was getting his fortune told in Delphi. The other guy was maybe mid-fifties, but his wardrobe was trendy back in the sixties and present-day Florida. White shoes, slicked back hair, short sleeves rolled up around twigs that wished they were biceps. Had a look in his eye that said he was meaner than a starving, rabid dog, but his pasted-on grin said he was real glad to see me.

"Who," he said, inspecting me, "are you? You must be a Makri, because that is one of the Makri dogs you brought with you. But I do not know your face. Which one are you married to?"

"Katerina Makris," I said, keeping a death-grip on my s. "And I'm not married to anyone. I'm looking for Baby Dimitri."

"You found him. Katerina Makri, eh?" He shot his buddies a curious glance. They had nothing for him but blank shrugs. "Where did the old woman get a granddaughter?" The question was for Xander, not me.

I rolled my eyes at the ceiling. "Do I need to explain how reproduction works? A man puts his—"

The Godfather of the Night and Souvenirs laughed big and loud. "I know how babies are made. I have made quite a few myself—sons and daughters. But until today I did not know your grandmother had a granddaughter."

"Surprise," I said. "I've been in America."

"America?" The three men swapped glances. "You are Michail's daughter then, eh?"

"That's right. And I'm here looking for him."

Astonishment plastered his face. But was it real or fake? "Why would you come here to look for your father? I have not seen the man in thirty or more years. Not since he ran away like a gypsy dog, with his tail tucked between his legs."

It kind of, maybe, a little bit, sounded like he knew my father. Dad always seemed like he was hiding out in America, and he did get out of Greece in a big hurry. But he wasn't a coward.

Was he?

Knowing what I already knew about my family, I couldn't blame him for hiding under America's bed all these years. I kind of wanted to hide there, too.

"I'm asking everyone if they've seen him." Not true, but if Baby

Dimitri didn't pan out I planned to knock on every door in Greece if need be.

"Oh? Who else?"

Think fast. "Uh, you're the first." Rats, not fast enough. "But there are others."

The men exchanged more glances. Laughed. Not a friendly kind of laugh, but the psychotic titter of hyenas as they considered an easy meal heading their way.

"So, do you have him?"

"What happened to your father?" Baby Dimitri asked me.

"Some men took him."

"Very interesting. Some men in America took him. Took him where? Did you see these men?"

I glanced at Xander to see what he was doing about backup, but he was standing outside, fiddling with his cell phone. Very helpful guy. Didn't talk, didn't help. Stood around with a gun and a phone and looked good.

"Not exactly." I straightened my spine. "But someone described them to me."

"Someone reliable?"

The neighborhood perv, but I wasn't about to tell them that. What if someone decided to silence the old guy? I wasn't crazy about the former judge, but he was harmless as long as you didn't look when he said, *Hey, look*!

"Reliable enough. If you know anything, I'd be grateful for any help."

"This one has nice manners," he said to his decrepit buddies.

Baby Dimitri got up out of his chair, moved about the shop with the same precision a satellite orbits the Earth when its trajectory is beginning to decay. Round and round he went, until he was one foul puff of air away. Seriously, the guy needed to brush with something other than garlic and raw fish eggs. He sucked saliva between his teeth then said, "I haven't seen your father. My men have not seen your father, nor have they been to America lately. Tell your grandmother that. Was this her idea?"

I stood my ground. "Mine. I figured it was nicer to ask politely what a person might want in return for my father. I was raised in America. Greeks might have invented democracy, but we rock at diplomacy." Well, sort of. There were times when America completely sucked at diplomacy, but maybe Baby Dimitri didn't watch the news or read the papers.

He nodded to one of his cronies. The old guy rose from his chair slowly, like someone was using a jack under his backside. He grinned on the way past. One gold tooth. Not a sign of enamel in his mouth.

An overabundance of gum space. I'd say he needed a dentist, but the time for dental care was long past.

"Where's he going?"

Baby Dimitri grinned. "So you are a diplomat, eh?"

"Trying to be. Is it working?"

"Eh." A one-shouldered shrug. "I will let you know. What did these men who took your father look like?"

"Foreign. The witness said they looked like mobsters."

The look he gave me was blank. "What else would kidnappers look like?"

Here we go again. "I'd try to blend—"

A deafening boom shook the shop and the world went up in big puffball of flames. The store window shattered and a body landed on top of me, crushing me into the concrete floor.

The body was Xander. He was big, heavy, and … God, I was going to die, my insides squished out like a jelly donut.

Maybe not. Evidently satisfied (more or less) that my life wasn't in immediate danger, he rolled off me and pulled me up by both hands. I leaned past him, looking for the source of the bang.

"Ohmigod, ohmigod!"

Flames had engulfed Xander's bike, turning it into a decent-sized bonfire. Bits of metal that had shot into the sky landed with a tinny clink.

Baby Dimitri laughed. "Looks like your motorcycle had a small accident. Was it made in China?"

"Ohmigod." I wheeled around to gape at the wannabe Floridian. "Did you just blow up Xander's motorcycle?"

He shrugged, two palms up. "Not me. But him?" He nodded toward the new ventilation system that had previously been a window. "Maybe."

His gold-toothed buddy was currently standing across the street by the water, rolling a cigarette. Goon number two was still in his chair, only now he was scraping the tip of a scary looking dagger under each nail, curls of gunk spiraling to the floor. This was one of those classy establishments. I wondered if every pair of shoes came with a complimentary dose of foot fungus? Up until that moment I'd been too freaked out to move. Now I had to get outside in case I caught scabies or pinworms.

Spectators had gathered around the burning motorcycle, and the crowd was growing. One kid had shoved a newspaper into the fire and now he was running up and down the street, pretending to bear the Olympic flame. Onlookers were holding their phones up in the air, capturing the moment for YouTube and Vine. I pushed to the front, where Xander was watching silently.

My hands grabbed my head and scrunched, digging into my scalp. This couldn't be happening. People don't just go around blowing up stuff. It wasn't … nice. Or legal.

A cop car pulled up. I did a double-take when Officer Friendly from last night got out. He nodded to Xander, who lobbed the nod back.

Good to see it wasn't just me who got the silent treatment.

"Nice fire," Officer Friendly said to no one in particular.

"There's a motorcycle under the fire," someone told him.

"Not for long."

It was true, the fire was gulping its lunch.

I looked at Xander. "I hope you're insured."

Could be yes, could be no, if his non-reaction was any indication.

"We meet again, Katerina Makri." Officer Friendly checked me out hard. He performed the approving body-scan thing with his eyes. Smooth.

Okay, so I wouldn't pretend I wasn't doing the same thing. In harsh daylight he had a few tiny lines huddled around his eyes, but that injected some humanity into the Photoshopped poster he'd presented last night.

"Officer Friendly," I said.

"Detective Melas. Nikos Melas."

"Stop looking at my boobs, Detective Melas."

"You're a doll," he said, grinning.

"Greece is full of pretty women." At least that's what the view along the waterfront was telling me, and I was bundled up like a snowman compared to most of them.

"Always room for one more."

My gaze slid sideways to see what Xander was making of this conversation, but he was too busy punching letters into a cellphone to care about Detective Nikos Melas and his idea of small talk.

"Whose motorcycle?" he asked.

I nodded to Xander. "His."

"How did it happen?"

Baby Dimitri was inside his shop, sawing a toothy line across his neck with one bony finger. Yikes. For the lie that came next I blamed a mixture of fear and the desire to not burn bridges. Maybe if he heard something about Dad, the Godfather of the Night and Shoes would contact me.

"Spontaneous combustion," I told the cop.

He snorted. "I don't believe you." He looked at the burning bike. "Your grandmother's not going to be happy."

"Do you know my family well?"

"Too well." He checked me out again. "And suddenly not well

enough."

"What can you tell me about them?"

He shrugged. "Nothing your grandmother would be happy about."

Oooooookay. "What are my cousins like?"

"Ugly. They're all men."

"All of them?"

Hands on hips, he shrugged. "You're the first female Makris since your grandmother. Bet she's got some big plans for you."

Yeah, and with luck they involved sending me home so I could talk to law enforcement.

"What about Aunt Rita?"

His eye twitched. "What about her?" Then he wandered off to talk to the firefighters who had just pulled up in their red truck. After some very Greek handwaving and chatter, they all turned around and looked at me.

I waved. No harm in being friendly—right?

An old woman hobbled over from the sidelines. She was about the same vintage as the ruins at the Parthenon. Face cobbled together with rocks. Black knee-high stockings with her slippers. Another widow.

"Are you Katerina Makri, Katerina Makri?"

It's Greek convention to ask if you belong to so-and-so. I tried not to wince. Not even in the country twenty-four hours and already people knew my name. That couldn't be good. "Yes?"

"Does your grandmother know you are making fire in the streets? When I see her I will tell her. She deserves to know that her granddaughter is a delinquent."

"Hey!" I started, but the old woman was already shuffling away, spitting as she went, warding away the evil eye … or me—if I was following.

Which I wasn't. The spitting was a fabulous deterrent. All kinds of diseases spread via bodily fluids. Who knew if there was some kind of weird Greek Ebola?

There could be, for all I knew, and I didn't want to catch it.

Detective Melas came back for round two. He pulled a card out of his shirt pocket, laid it on my palm, curled my fingers around the pliant paper. "Need anything, call me."

I looked at my hand, then up at him. "What would I need?"

"Coffee, company, maybe some fun." He winked. "See you, Cookie," he said in perfect English, then he got back into his cop car and did a U-turn.

Baby Dimitri sauntered out. He shook his head at dying fire.

"Go home, Katerina Makris with an s. There are monsters here, and some of them are your blood. If you stay, you will find only trouble

and sadness—or it will find you."

"Where are we going?"

Xander pointed up—up at the sky.

"Back to the house?"

He nodded.

"And we're walking?"

Another nod.

"All the way there?"

He stopped, looked at me. Nodded.

"Wow. That's a long way."

Now his expression was semi-pissed, like this was my fault. Which it kind of was. If I hadn't had the bright idea of knocking on the equivalent of a kingpin's front door, his crony wouldn't have firebombed Xander's motorcycle, and I'd be admiring Greece from the back of a very fast, very nice motorcycle.

"Isn't there—I don't know—a bus or something?"

He stopped again, looked at me like I was busting his balls. How far could I push him before he snapped? Maybe he'd just shoot me, stash my body in these bushes.

The village was behind us. The only thing ahead of us was a lot of mountain and a steep, winding road occasionally punctuated by a car or a bus or— "Bus!"

I leaped into the middle of the twisty road, waving my arms. The bus—loaded down with tourists, by the looks of their sunburn and the manic curiosity in their eyes—didn't slow down. It lurched to one side, dodging the crazy woman in the middle of the road, waving her arms. A dozen hands shoved a dozen cell phones out the window. Great. Now I was destined to wind up on YouTube, twice in one day.

"I hate Greece," I said, hanging my head. "And it hates me right back."

Xander turned back, marched to the middle of the road. With one smooth move, he threw me over his shoulders in a fireman's carry.

"You can't do that!" I squeaked.

But apparently he could, because he already had.

It was a long walk home, especially for Xander. For me it wasn't so bad. The view alternated between Xander's abs and Xander's butt, both of which had been lovingly crafted, one dumbbell at a time.

Grandma was waiting just inside the gates when we arrived, along

with what should have been our cavalry. Looked like they were enjoying the show a little bit too much, if you ask me.

"Katerina, Xander, how did it go?" Grandma hollered through cupped hands. "Where is your father, Katerina? Is he catching a taxi cab?"

"Good news," I called out, waving. "Baby Dimitri doesn't have him."

"Oh? How do you know?"

"He said so."

"He said so. Good," she said. "Because you can always trust the word of a criminal."

This from the woman who had obviously never heard the one about the pot calling the kettle black. Maybe they didn't have that saying here.

The whole family wasn't standing out front with Grandma—but close, by the looks of it. Every one of them grinning. Good to know they found me entertaining. The two amigos, Takis and Stavros, were there for the show, too. Stavros looked contrite, but not Takis—he was laughing his fool head off.

I patted Xander on the hip. "Can you put me down?" Nobody was taking me seriously, and I was starting to think maybe the whole being carried thing was part of the reason. Xander let me down easy. Good guy, he didn't just dump me on the ground like I was potatoes—or *patates*, as my father always called them.

"Who will you talk to next, Katerina?" Grandma asked.

My eyes cut from face to face. A lot of them resembled the woman I saw in my mirror and other reflective surfaces. Yes, they were men, but so what? A nose is a nose. It can sneeze just as well on a woman's face as a man's.

"Give me a name." I waved to the rest of my family. One by one, introductions happened, kisses were dispensed on both cheeks. A lot of repetition in the first names department, on account of how Greek kids get their first names from their grandparents. Originality when naming children is frowned upon. If you want to smash your parents' hearts, go ahead, give your child some fancy name that sounds better to your loveless, betraying ears. Do it. See how fast they write you out of the will. Better to give your child that same old recycled name as his or her other cousins if you want to stay good with the family.

I was pretty sure mine was one of those families you wanted to stay good with.

By the time the first round of introductions were over my face felt slimy from all the kissing.

"Give you a name," Takis said. "Ha! Baby Dimitri went easy on you. Some of the others, they would have spared the motorcycle and set you on fire."

"Really? Just for asking if maybe my father is in their basement?"

"This is Greece," Takis said. "We almost never have basements. The ground is too rocky."

"Their attics, then."

"We almost never have attics, either."

"So …" I tilted my head, doing a passable impression of the *RC Victor* dog in front of the gramophone. "… where do you keep stuff you're not using?"

"We are not American, we don't buy things we don't need."

Stavros turned to him. "What about that big TV you bought? You already had a big TV."

"That was different. One was plasma, the other was LCD."

"What's the difference?" Stavros asked.

Takis said it slowly this time. "One is plasma, the other is LCD."

I rolled my eyes. "Can we not pick on my people?"

"We are your people," Takis said. "Blood is blood."

Hot stars crowded into my eyes, some of them dancing along my eyelashes. If I didn't take preventative action now, they were going to storm the dam. They'd never take me seriously if I cried. Look at Grandma. That wasn't a woman who did crying. She kept the remnants of her dead husband in a can in the kitchen, for Chrissake. That wasn't sentimental, that was crazy. And also potentially problematic for anyone who didn't know about Granddad in the oil can. What if someone mistook him for salad dressing? It could happen.

"Okay, so if I can't use diplomacy on these clowns, what can I use?"

Glances passed from face to face. I was nuts and their expressions all said so.

"A kidnapping means we must wait until the kidnapper reveals themselves. Then we will be at point of diplomacy."

"If that doesn't work?"

"Then it will be time for guns," Grandma said. "And maybe knives. Possibly poison."

"And that will get my father back?"

"Not if he is already dead."

Black dots obscured my vision. I plopped down on the flagstone driveway. The hot stone seared my skin, but the pain didn't last long. Nerve damage, probably.

"Shit," I said. "Shit and piss."

I cried anyway. Everyone kind of looked at each other like, *Crying? What do we do about crying*?

"My Virgin Mary," Takis said. "My wife does this when I come home bleeding." Murmurs of assent wafted through the family.

My nose began to twitch. Somebody was cooking, and whatever

was on the menu smelled better than barbecue. Meat—definitely meat—and there were hot coals and exotic herbs and spices involved.

The tears subsided. "Is that lunch?" I asked, suddenly jacked up on hope.

Chapter 5

THAT WORM TAKIS wasn't lying, his wife was a large woman. Her flowery summer dress was doing it damnedest to cover all of her, but it was fumbling with the buttons. Marika rolled over him to get to me. "Katerina!" she cried, before bombing my cheeks with kisses. She had a kind, sweet face and she smelled like vanilla beans. "Come," she said, "We have made a party for you. A surprise party!"

Not anymore. "A party for me?"

"Of course! Most of the time we have parties for no good reason, but now here you are! Opa!"

I'd never heard anyone "*Opa*!" outside of a movie before. Was someone going to smash plates? Because plate smashing looked like fun. Suddenly, I was craving a good plate smashing.

The courtyard had morphed into party central. Long tables set up in rows. Chairs everywhere. A handful of men were sitting on a small stage, tuning instruments. They were family, too, by the looks of their noses and ears.

Marika introduced me to the other wives and children. I lost track fast. A family this size, name tags should have been compulsory. They were all excited to meet me and had a million questions about everything from shopping to politics. I had answers, but before I had a chance to speak, there was a new question, then another, then another. Soon I was drowning in inquiries about everything USA.

Too bad circumstances weren't different. I liked these people, I wanted to know them, but every minute that ticked by was another minute Dad was missing. I needed Takis and Stavros to throw me back into the family plane and rocket me back to Portland.

Instead, Marika was thrusting a plate into my hands and piling it with food as she chatted.

"This is lamb," she told me. "One of ours."

The lamb in question was skewered on a steel pole over hot coals, giving us all the slow rotating hoof as one of the cousins turned the rotisserie's handle. Both eyes were still in its head, and a chunk of meat was missing off its rump.

A dim part of my brain—the part that occasionally had trouble distinguishing truth from fiction, but only when I'd been kidnapped or awake for three days straight—wondered if the sheep was going to jump down and offer itself for the eating in a *Restaurant at the End of the Universe* moment.

"Poor sheep," I said.

Takis had snuck up on us. He grinned at my sudden pallor. "If God did not want us to eat animals, then why are they so delicious?"

Marika slapped him around the ear.

"Ow!"

He wandered away, muttering.

Marika pointed to each thing on my plate, told me its name. Some of it I was familiar with already, but others were total mysteries. I pointed to a blob of pink goop. "What is that?"

Because how bad could anything pink be?

"*Taramasalata*. Fish eggs," she said.

"And this?" I picked at a delicious slice of crispy meat that wasn't lamb.

"*Kokoretsi*…"

Ooo, it sounded great!

"It is hearts, lungs, kidneys, liver, tied with intestines." She kissed her fingertips. "Delicious!"

We had different standards, clearly. But I didn't want to offend people who could kill me and stuff my corpse in a bridge, so I picked around the icky bits and promised the mingling hounds that I'd share at the first opportunity.

The introductions kept on coming. I was hopelessly lost, and I couldn't get Dad off my mind.

"I need to get home," I said, but no one was listening.

"This is Papou," Grandma said, sometime later.

Papou. Grandfather.

Papou had a face like a war-torn African nation. He was on the north end of eighty, and he got from A to B in a custom wheelchair that included a rack for a shotgun and a pouch for his drainage bag. His smile was toothless, his eyes yellow, and he smelled like lemonade.

"Papou is what those Sicilians call a consigliere," Grandma told me. "He is my *symvoulos*."

Her adviser.

"Is he really your grandfather?" I asked.

"He is nobody's grandfather, which is a good thing."

The old man spoke. "A Nazi pig shot off one of my balls during the war."

"That's awful," I said, trying to be sympathetic. "I'm sorry.'

He nodded. "It was my favorite one, next to the other one." He looked up at Grandma. "What are you going to do with her?"

"What can I do? Keep her here until we find Michail."

"Nuh-uh." I shook my head to punctuate. Hopefully they'd get the message. "I'm going home. There's no evidence Dad left the country—alone or with anyone else. There I've got the police and the FBI. They'll know what to do."

"The FBI," Papou muttered. "There is a problem we need."

Grandma explained. "A family like this, we want the law enforcement to stay far, far away from our business."

"Unless they are ours," the old man said.

"You have law enforcement?" I asked, wide-eyed. "You mean like health inspectors?"

The two of them laughed. Grandma patted me on the arm. "I will be back. Enjoy yourself, Katerina. This is for you." She hoofed it back to her yard, where Xander was waiting with a phone in his hand. He gave her the phone, then followed her inside while she chattered to whoever was on the other end. A business call. I could tell by the way her soft, wrinkly face turned to stone.

The old man wasn't done with me yet. "Come, Katerina. You can get me something to eat."

"What would you like?"

"Everything except vegetables. Meat only. I want to die soon, so I am clogging my arteries with fat."

"Some diets claim a high fat diet is better for you."

"Really?" He thought about it for a moment. "Then which diet is the worst?"

"Probably the baked goods diet. Something with lots of carbs and sugar."

"Okay." He nodded to the plate I'd just picked up. "Load it up with desserts. Do not skimp or I will shoot you."

I looked over the desserts lined up on the table, each one begging for one shot at giving me diabetes.

"If you want to die, why not shoot yourself?"

"Your grandmother will not let me have ammunition for my gun."

"So," I said, thinking about it. "Theoretically I could put vegetables on your plate and there's nothing you'd be able to do about it?"

In a flash, the shotgun was in his hand. The barrel slammed into the backs of my knees. "Oof," I said as my scaffolding temporarily collapsed. It took me a moment, but I pulled myself upright. "Hey, old man, hit me again and I'll make a completely ineffectual threat."

"What kind of threat?"

I thought about own worst fears. "I'll push that chair of yours into quicksand. Or roll you into a cage filled with geese."

"Geese are evil," he said. "I wouldn't wish them on an enemy."

"They really are. It's a surprise there aren't more horror movies

about geese."

"I know people in the Greek movie business. I will let them know."

"Great," I said, already scratching that movie off my must-see list.

He hit me again, not as hard this time. "Where's my cake?"

After the party, the drinking, the dancing, the food, everyone napped. Everyone except Grandma and me. We were in her kitchen. She was baking and I was watching her weave magic with simple carbohydrates and fat.

"Am I really the first woman born in the family since you?"

Grandma glanced up at me from the hairy stuff she was slicing. *Baklava*'s hirsute cousin by the looks of it. "Where did you hear that?"

"Detective Melas."

"Melas, eh? What was he doing?"

"Investigating the fire."

She grunted. "He has a big mouth."

"What's the big deal?"

"Eh, nothing. He is right, you are the first. Nobody has made a girl—even me—except your father."

"What about Aunt Rita?"

Grandma's expression turned constipated. "I wanted a daughter. Rita is what I got. A man who wears women's clothes."

"Hey," I said, "if Aunt Rita calls herself a woman, she's a woman, as far as I'm concerned."

"America has made your brain soft. Your parents should have raised you Greek. Your Aunt Rita has three sons with his second wife."

"She's married?"

"Three times. Number Three—already I forget her name—is doing sex with one of the cousins."

"And you're okay with that?"

Grandma shrugged. "She is not my wife. If she were my wife …" Her sentence fell off a cliff, into what I suspected was a pit full of very sharp things.

Time to change the subject. Behold, my smooth transition.

"You said we had to wait on the kidnapper to make their demands before you could do anything. I'm going to wait at home, just in case they call there."

"No. Your family needs you and you need us."

"What do you need me for?"

"When there is trouble—and there is trouble—family is the only thing you can trust."

This was a woman who hadn't seen the *Jerry Springer Show*, or

Maury, or that balding, grinning Texan. Or any of the reality TV shows plaguing American television. Fact was, sometimes family was the last thing a person could trust. Every American knew that.

"Did you know Baby Dimitri didn't have Dad?"

"Yes."

"So why send me there to make a fool of myself?"

"I knew he did not have Michail, but that does not mean he did not take him."

"You mean you suspected someone outsourced the muscle to Baby Dimitri?"

"At first I thought yes, but now I do not think it was him. Are you a brave woman, Katerina?" she went on. "I think you are. You stormed into Baby Dimitri's shop like an avenging angel."

More like a smart-ass, with a mouthful of checks my body couldn't afford to cash. I was hot-stuff with Xander as backup, fixated on his phone, and at the time I had been amped up on a cocktail of jet lag, desperation, fear, and confusion.

Come to think of it, I still was.

"Not so much brave as deluded."

"Bravery is not something you feel. It is something you do. I have been brave many times, but not once have I felt brave. In this family we need brave people, or the family will not survive."

I slept for a week. Or maybe twelve hours that felt like a hundred and sixty-eight. When I got up it was slowly. I ran a hand down my legs to make sure I hadn't gone Rip Van Winkle. Slight stubble but not a full forest. Phew!

After losing fifteen minutes to a shower, I wandered into the kitchen and found my aunt but no Grandma. She was drinking brown sludge and daintily picking at the hairy stuff I'd watched Grandma bake.

She blew me a kiss. "The best thing about being a man under the hood is that I can eat more without gaining weight."

"You're so lucky," I said, sliding into the seat across from her. I wanted coffee, the kind with foam and milk and a squirt of vanilla syrup, not engine sludge. "Where's Grandma?"

"In the gardens. She does all the gardening herself. I keep telling her to hire a gardener or two, but does she listen?"

"No?"

"No."

Stubborn. Or maybe she just really got her kicks doing the gardening.

"So what's the deal with Xander, does he ever speak?"

"Xander, Xander. *Oooh la la*. He is a tasty dish. Very sad history, that man. Very sad. Tragic."

I looked at my aunt, both eyebrows raised—the international expression of, *Just hurry up and tell me before I explode*.

Aunt Rita wasn't biting. "I am not one to gossip. But his story is very sad."

Argh! Why wouldn't people here just speak plainly? Just one question answered in a straight line; question leads to satisfying answer. But no. Ask a simple question and they gave me alternate routes, codes, and detours leading to nowhere but frustration and confusion.

The screen door opened and Grandma shuffled in, no sign that she'd been playing with compost and worms. "Are you ready, Katerina?"

"What for?"

"Church."

The massive garage doors had retracted, showing off the family's car collection. No limo for us today. The cousins who kept the motors running around here had parked a shiny black SUV in front of the fountain, where Thetis the sea nymph, and goddess of water, was pouring a bottomless jar of the wet stuff into a marble pool.

Grandma hoisted herself into the passenger side, then reached across and flung open the driver's side door. "You drive," she said. "I do not have a license."

Hadn't stopped her the other night.

I climbed in. The SUV came equipped with running boards but it was still a struggle to heave myself into the driver's seat without flopping around like a walrus. How Grandma was so limber and spry was a mystery. The vehicle's seats were leather, the dash fully loaded, and when I turned the key there was a grating, peppy voice asking me where I wanted to go. I'm not a violent person, but I wanted to karate chop her throat. For the record, everything I knew about karate I learned from *The Karate Kid*. The original, of course. Not that remake I tell myself never happened.

Anyway, Grandma seemed to be okay with the inquisitive computer woman. "GPS," she said, beaming. "Her voice is always so cheerful, it makes me happy." She leaned forward like she was about to kiss its shiny black buttons. "Makria."

The screen set into the dash came to life. The tiny woman stowed in the computer began to nag. I knew it. She wanted me to turn left

and she wanted me to do it now—in a sweet, electronic voice.

Grandma jumped in on the act. "What are you waiting for? For the Turks to come back? Turn left!"

The SUV crawled across the paved ground to the iron gates. The man in the guardhouse—a different one today—pushed a button and I nudged the SUV forward until we were clear.

Grandma rolled down her window and stuck her head out. "Give my love to your mother," she said to the guard.

"I will. Thank you, *Nouna*." Godmother.

"Are you actually his godmother?" I asked, once we were on the move again.

"Yes."

The GPS woman told me to stick to the dirt road, so I did that until she passive-aggressively told me to turn left where the dirt met the blacktop that threaded itself around the mountain like dull tinsel.

"Why is the town named Makria?" In the Greek-English lexicon *makria* meant *away*. As in, far, far away. "Is it named after our family?"

"Yes," she said, not volunteering further details.

"Why? Did our family do something amazing?"

"Our family has accomplished many things."

The SUV bounced slightly as I coaxed it onto the main road. Its suspension seemed to sigh with relief that we were past the point of dirt and stones.

"Turn left in half a kilometer," the electronic woman said.

How far was a kilometer? How far was a half of that?

"Help," I said, "What's a kilometer?"

Grandma shook her head. "Americans. Turn left here."

The name was a lie. Makria wasn't far, far away at all. It was—apparently—half a kilometer up the street from the family compound. The village was compact. It contained all the essentials along one short cobbled street: bakery, meat market, produce store, grocery store, and a couple of souvenir shops that sold collectables, mostly made in China, no doubt. It was a postcard-worthy place, something I confirmed when I saw the village's portrait twirling on a postcard rack near a shelf of Makria mugs, wind chimes, and calendars.

The stunted street split in four at a crude crossroad. One arm led to a village square, which contained a half dozen souvenir carts, cafes, and enough tourists to fill a plane. They all had cellphones, which they were using to snap pictures of the view. From here I couldn't tell if the view was Instagram-worthy or not. Their heads were clumped together, blocking the way.

One of the other three arms climbed the mountain. It was flanked by houses and frequented by livestock that dropped hillocks of dung

on their way from field to field.

The final arm dead-ended at a church that was bigger than it needed to be in a village this size. The outside was stone, the dome white, and—in the absence of a lightning rod—the cross was big enough wipe out everyone in town if the antichrist needed them to shut their traps about his identity.

"*Ayia* Aikaterini," Grandma said.

Saint Catherine.

The grand double doors were open. I followed her inside.

Saint Catherine's guts had been designed by the latest crop of rappers and hip-hop artists. Gold everywhere. Everything that wasn't gold was silver, or something like it. Saints had been captured on the ceiling and walls in moments of extreme boredom; they were tired of hanging around, and they didn't care who knew it. Even J.C. Himself had a mild frown that suggested that he'd prefer to excuse himself and find the nearest bar.

The *pappas*—a.k.a. the father, a.k.a. the priest—rushed to greet Grandma. He was a half dozen heartbeats away from a heart attack. He was red-nosed and purple-cheeked and the circumference of his waist was greater than his height. If I had to staple an adjective to his forehead I'd call him *jolly*.

"Kyria Katerina," he said, beaming. He wiped his hands on his black cassock. "What a treat it is to see you on a weekday. I only saw you just this weekend." She didn't kiss his ring as was customary; he kissed hers. Maybe that was customary, too.

"Father Harry," she said, "I have come to light candles."

"Of course, of course! And candles you shall have—as many as you like." His attention slid to me. "A new face, and a lovely one. Welcome to *Ayia* Aikaterini. I am Father Haralambos, but everyone calls me Father Harry."

After performing brief introductions, Grandma left me with the jolly priest while she paid homage to the icon of the Virgin Mary and her son. She pressed her lips to the glass, crossed herself forehead to chest, shoulder to shoulder, then went to front of the church, where she sat in one of the polished pews. Like most Greek Orthodox churches the seating was limited. Pews were there for the elderly, the infirm, the strays that wandered in to pray outside of services. Everyone else was expected to stand—women on the left, men on the right. All equal in the eyes of God … except not.

"She always comes here to pray in times of trouble." He looked at me. "Are these times of trouble?"

"I think so. My father has possibly been kidnapped."

"Ah. That's why she's praying out loud, then."

"You can tell her," Grandma called out.

I must have looked baffled, because he explained. "The front of the church is bugged. Just about every law enforcement agency in the world is listening in."

"And she knows?"

"It was her idea."

My mind blanked. "Why?"

He rocked back on his heels. "Do you know about Saint Catherine?"

"Not really," I said. Meaning up until now I had never given her a second thought. Most Greek names are derivative of one saint's name or another, and Catherine was Katerina's point of origin.

"Saint Catherine was born in Egypt. Alexandria, to be precise. She was a brilliant woman, the daughter of a king. Clever. Educated. And very beautiful, like your grandmother was when she was a young woman, and like you are now. Many, many men pursued Catherine, but she turned them all away. She said she would not marry until a man who was more beautiful, more educated, more brilliant than herself came into her life. But there was no such man until she was introduced to Christianity. Jesus Christ was the man she sought, and to him she pledged herself forever, wearing the ring of their union upon her finger."

"What happened to her?" Nothing good ever happened to saints. They always seemed to meet sticky ends, often involving fire. Saints are the poster children for bad things happening to good people.

"The Roman emperor, Maximinus, upon seeing her, wanted her for himself. She refused to be unfaithful to Christ, and so the emperor had her killed. His executioner cut off her head."

I was feeling slightly woozy. It would have been nicer to be named after someone who lived an amazing life and died happily in their sleep, some hundred years after their birth. "Okay …"

"Kyria Katerina, your grandmother, is like her namesake. She is devoted, one hundred percent. Her commitment to her family is unwavering. Everything she does is for her family and the people in her care."

"Like …" I felt around in the metaphorical darkness. "…you?"

"This whole village. She has performed miracles for people here. Is she a good person, a bad person, who can say? Whether a person is good or bad is sometimes a matter of perception. From here—" The sweep of his arm encompassed the whole church. "—she is a saint."

"You talk too much, Father Harry," a voice cut in.

Grandma was back.

I was faking it when I remembered Detective Melas's business card.

Everyone else was indulging in a siesta, and I wanted my share of the napping goodness, but sleep wasn't happening, no matter how hard I reached for it. Finally I just lied to myself and said I'd drifted off for a moment, and surely that counted—right?

My hand went pocket diving. It pulled out Detective Melas's business card. Black on white. Nothing fancy. Definitely not *American Psycho* quality. Grandma wasn't home—Xander had driven her into Volos after the church—but that didn't stop me tiptoeing into the kitchen for the phone. I unhooked it from the wall and tiptoed back to my room. My cell phone was in my handbag, but I was pretty sure it wasn't set to call from Greece, and I wasn't in the mood to argue and plead with customer disservice, who would understand half of what I said and nothing I meant.

Detective Melas picked up on the third ring. "Melas," he said.

No time to waste on small talk. I poked him in the ear with my pointed question: Who was my father and why would anyone snatch a guy who'd been gone thirty years?

A long silence happened. During that time I wondered if I'd accidentally dialed Xander.

"Want my advice?" he said, finally. "Go home. Call a friend, beg, borrow, steal if you have to, but get a plane ticket home and go. Today."

"Can't. I don't have a passport."

"Jesus," he said. "I don't want to know how they got you into Greece."

"Same way they got me out of the United States: illegally."

"*La la la.* I'm not listening."

"Anyway, I think I might be changing my mind about leaving. I'm not going anywhere if my father's here."

"Do you have any proof he's in Greece?"

"No."

"So he could still be in America."

"My grandmother doesn't think so."

A big sigh leaked out of him. "Your family is …"

I imagined him scratching his head, hunting for the right word. One that wouldn't get him killed.

"… dysfunctional."

"Everybody's family is dysfunctional. It's like the law of families, or something."

His laugh was more like a bark. "Your family is more messed up than most. Don't tell me you don't know what they are."

The picture was getting clearer by the minute. "Let's pretend I'm stupid."

Another sigh. The man had talent. "Okay. Jesus. Your father was

your grandmother's right fist before he took off thirty years ago. She barked the orders, and he took care of people who needed their minds changing—or worse. A lot of stories around about what happened to him. I don't know which is true. One story goes, she wanted him to marry some girl—another Family's daughter—to cement a business deal."

"What deal?"

"Tobacco. It's one of Greece's biggest crops. Your grandmother wanted in. Had transport lined up and a buyer in Bulgaria waiting to go."

"Why tobacco?"

"In those days taxes on tobacco were low. But in other European countries taxes were rising and people were looking for cheaper alternatives to what was on the shelves. Legal or not, didn't matter. Never does to addicts. One of the biggest names in the Greek tobacco industry had a daughter your father's age. Her father wanted connections in Bulgaria and your grandmother wanted tobacco. So they pledged their two kids to the cause. Then your father disappeared. There were stories he was dead, buried in a speed bump, drowned out at sea. Rumors your grandmother shot him herself."

My face was going hot-cold-hot. Menopause already? Couldn't be. I had maybe twenty years before my parts started desiccating.

"My grandmother wouldn't shoot her own son."

He snorted. "She killed her own brother-in-law."

"What?" I squawked.

"He sold insider information to a rival Family, so she poisoned his Name Day cake. Or so the story goes."

"I want to go home." My voice was faint. It had already packed its bags, fled the coop.

"Great idea. That's what I'm telling you."

"Except my father would still be missing. Where is he?" I was asking the universe more than Melas himself, but he answered.

"We don't know, and I'm not convinced your grandmother does either. She'd go guns-in if she knew for sure. Hell, maybe she knows but there's some other plan twirling around inside her head. You never know with that woman."

"Why now? Why kidnap him? It makes no sense."

There was a long, problematic silence before the detective spoke again.

"What did your father do in America?"

"For work? He was a truck driver."

Two beats, then: "Was he?"

The '*of course*' played peanut butter, sticking to my mouth's pink roof. "Okay, so let's say he wasn't—which is what you suspect—how

do I find him?"

"You don't. Whoever took him took him for a reason. They expect to profit, so you can't just knock on doors, bat your eyelashes, and ask for your father back."

"Then what *am* I supposed to do?"

He groaned. Seemed like I brought out his inner emo. "You're not giving up and going home, are you?"

"Would you?"

"If it were my father? Never. But I'm in a different position. My father's a baker—a verifiable baker. His biggest sin is keeping a cat in the bakery."

"So if you were me, where would you start?"

"I'd figure out what your grandmother is doing that's new. Business-wise, I'm talking. Has she made any new deals, new friends? Any old deals where the terms have suddenly changed?"

"Okay …"

"Wait," he said. "Are you calling me on the house phone?"

"Yes."

"Jesus," he said, and hung up.

What was his problem? Now I had a head rattling with questions and not nearly enough answers to satisfy them. Figure out what Grandma's got going on—how was I going to do that? I didn't know the layout of the family compound, let along the layout of the family itself. Who was I supposed to trust? Who spat out answers if you thumped their back the right way?

Takis and Stavros. They both had a way of unintentionally burping up details. And Stavros was the nicer guy. Takis was more of an anthropomorphic weasel.

I'd start with the human and work my way down.

Chapter 6

STAVROS WAS WIFELESS, so he was banished to the bottom floor in the section of the compound known as the bachelors' barracks. One of the family kids ponied up the information for the sweet, low price of me listening, while he and his—and my—cousins practiced their English on me.

Fifteen minutes of "What you name?" and "Where's the party?" later, I was wandering pale hallways inside the main house.

The bachelors' barracks were less barracks, more suites, complete with kitchenettes and en-suites, from what I could see as I peered into open rooms. They made my new digs look even sadder.

And every suite had cable TV and Internet, or so the kids had told me. Grandma was generous with the family. If this family was what I thought it was, I suspected generosity wasn't so much a benevolent move as it was political tactics. Keep family happy and they stay loyal. There would always be one or two waiting to squeeze Grandma for more, but they were outliers. The bulk of the family could be kept loyal through the adequate and regular dispersal of luxury items.

Translation: Shiny things buy loyalty.

Right on. Because I was thinking that right now indoor plumbing could purchase me as a friend for life.

I knocked on Stavros's door.

"Who is it?" His voice was muffled.

"Katerina."

Some distance away, behind the white paneled door, he let out a string of colorful curse words. Something about engaging in sexual atrocities with the Virgin Mary, someone's mother, and a donkey. "Come back later."

"I can't."

"Why not? Everybody can come back later if they really want to."

I leaned against the jamb. "Are you watching porn?"

He spluttered. "No! What is wrong with you? Who watches pornography?" The door opened. He peeked through the crack. "Okay, I was watching pornography. But do not tell Baboulas, okay?"

"Your secret is safe with me. I need some help." I gave him an expectant look.

He glanced over my shoulder, probably for trouble and other spies. "What help?"

"I have questions. I need answers." He opened his mouth. "Honest

answers," I said firmly.

"Heh."

"I mean it. Otherwise …" I peered past him. "*Baa-baa*."

The door slammed, a chain rattled, then the door swung open. Clad only in boxers, he reminded me of a bear with mange. Unlike a bear, he was managing to scratch his head and nuts at the same time.

His suite was blue. Blue paint, blue furnishings, blue art. The mostly naked women on the walls wore shreds of blue bikinis and lingerie. Only his electronics and appliances ignored his color palette. They were white.

"What do you want to know?"

"Who do you think has my father?"

He dropped onto the couch, leaving me to perch on the arm of one of two matching armchairs. Head in hands he said, "Nobody wants to know what I think. Baboulas doesn't pay me to think."

"What does she pay you to do?"

"Follow orders, same as anyone else."

"So who does the thinking—besides Baboulas?"

"Papou, Rita, sometimes Takis and Xander. Papou is her advisor and your aunt Rita is the family accountant. All of them, and your uncle Kostas in Germany, they report directly to Baboulas." He looked at me wide-eyed. "Do not tell her I call her that, okay?"

"She already knows, remember?"

He gulped.

"I think she kind of likes it," I added. "It makes her seem more fearsome. Wait—I have an uncle in Germany?"

"You didn't know?"

I flopped into the chair, slumping like a sack of potatoes, wondering if I'd ever be able to get the hell out of Wonderland. "I don't know anything."

He sat up, pointed at me. "That's a good attitude. Stick with that."

"But I want to know everything."

He sank again. "And that attitude will get you killed."

"Give it to me straight. Is our family the Greek mafia?"

He nodded.

My mind was officially boggled, and horrified, and somehow not that surprised. I knew it, but I was glad to have the words said aloud.

"I was hoping the family was just weird. Or maybe in a circus."

"No circus," he said in a sad voice. "Just organized crime. You know, I never wanted to be a gangster."

"No kidding? What did you want to be?"

"A stay-at-home father."

"You'd be good at that."

He perked up. "You think so?"

"Sure, why not?"

When I got back to the kitchen, Grandma, Aunt Rita, and Papou had their heads together over the kitchen table. Plotting dastardly deeds, no doubt.

"I'm staying right here," I announced, "and I'm not leaving Greece until I find my father—alive."

"Oh you are, are you?" Papou asked.

I glanced at the shriveled old nut in the wheelchair. "Yes."

"What if Michail is dead?" he added.

Unthinkable. "I'll bring him back to life somehow. I'll … go to Hogwarts or offer Hades my Jeep. Whatever it takes."

On the far side of the table, Grandma smiled like she knew it all along.

I was predictable—rats!

"Take her with you," she told Aunt Rita. "She will be a surprise."

My glance slid from face to face. "A surprise? Where are we going?"

Aunt Rita's laugh scraped past her Adam's apple. "Dina will *kaka* her pants."

We parked at the foot of a narrow street with an incline that had once aspired to be a ninety-degree angle, but collapsed and dropped dead before it reached its goal. No blacktop, just cracked and thirsty concrete. Heat rose in rippled sheets off the ground. A grill cook could throw together most of the IHOP menu out here. Houses clung stubbornly to the hill. Greece and its necessary obsession with earthquake-proofing told me the homes were sturdier than they looked, that the tectonic plates could bump fists and high five but these residents and their homes weren't going anywhere.

Aunt Rita had filled me in on the way over, while Xander drove. Dina was Dad's temporary squeeze before he fled Greece, and she was nutty enough to believe he'd return for her someday. She was obsessed, my aunt told me, so if someone had snuck Dad into Greece, there was a minor chance she'd know, on account of how she had stalker potential.

Sun lashing our backs, the three of us hiked up the hill. The clock called it early evening, but the sun was determined to flog Greece until the moon got around to kicking it out of the sky. Which, in July, would be around ten o'clock.

"It's not so bad today," my aunt said. "August is worse."

Good times. With luck I wouldn't be here to find out. Dad and I would be at home in Portland, counting down to rainy season.

Dad's ex girlfriend lived in a white bungalow, in a row of nearly identical white bungalows. They were all flat-topped with television antennas and washing lines as their hat decorations of choice. Each yard was metal fenced, and gardens consisted of various arrangements of potted plants, most of them in red pots.

"What's with all the red pots?" I asked my aunt.

"They are red for luck."

"Really?"

"I don't know. But it sounds good, doesn't it?"

It did sound plausible, especially for a group of people as superstitious as Greeks. When they weren't spitting to ward away the evil eye, they were crossing themselves, hoping God would ride to the rescue.

"There's no bigger martyr on the planet than Dina," Aunt Rita continued. "You have to know that before we go in there."

"Do you think she knows something?"

"Probably not. But I wouldn't die of surprise if she kidnapped your father and hid him in her closet."

"You think she'll let us in?"

"Honey, she'll let us in. If there's one thing she loves it's an audience. A martyr can't be a martyr unless someone is watching."

I was curious about Dad's ex. He never mentioned her in my earshot. "What's she like?"

"She's a *mouni*," she said, matter-of-factly.

We dressed in our business best, which for me was jeans and a T-shirt. My cousins forgot to pack for those twenty-one days out of the month when I didn't bleed. I'd need clothes and I'd need them soon. Aunt Rita made up for it, though. She was dressed for a spring day circa the 1940's, in a long pencil skirt and one of those little hats perched on her head like a pet monkey. Xander had managed to locate a T-shirt to go with his shorts.

We sidled up to the gate with every intention of ringing the doorbell, but Dina—I presumed—was already outside, broom in hand, sweeping the clean swaths of concrete that made up her front yard. Nothing green in sight. Not a single potted plant.

Dad's ex was built compact and solid and boxy, like a German car. She was wearing a frilly black blouse tucked into mom jeans. Her cleavage rivaled the Grand Canyon, telling me she was blessed, or in bed with a surgical virtuoso who knew how to move mountains. Her dyed brown hair had that Farrah Fawcett flick.

Aunt Rita tapped one of her big, gaudy dress rings on the metal

gate and walked through. I followed her. "Who died?" my aunt asked.

Dina glanced up. "I did, the day your brother left me. And now I am like that mosquito in amber from that dinosaur movie."

Aunt Rita gave me a look that said this woman was cuckoo. "That was years ago."

"And I have been dead since then, only somebody forgot to tell my body, so I keep sweeping."

"All the time?" I asked.

She looked at me the way I look at spiders. "Who are you?"

My aunt filled in the blank for her, and if you ask me, she did it with thinly disguised glee. "This is Michail's daughter, Katerina."

There was a horrified gasp as she clutched an acre of chest. The whisk broom clattered on the ground. "Since when does my Michail have a daughter?"

My feathers ruffled. I puffed myself up to battle-size. "Since he married my mother and put his—"

"Lies." Hands on hips. Chin jutting out. "There was only me."

"Relax," my aunt muttered behind her hand. "Even in the old days when it was her, it wasn't just her."

Dina shot her with hate rays. "I heard that. What do you want?"

"We're looking for Michail," Aunt Rita said.

Eyes wide, her glance bounced from Aunt Rita to me and back again. "He's missing?"

"Something like that."

"And you think he is here? Why would he be here?" Once more with the chest clutching. Joy, with a hefty side of crazy, plastered itself on her face. Thirty years of suppressed insanity in one facial expression. "It's a sign! He's coming for me at last, just like in my dreams!"

Aunt Rita scoffed at that. "Nobody goes back to a meal they didn't want to finish thirty years ago."

"*Kolobaras*."

"*Mouni*."

"At least I have one," Dina said.

"I know, I've seen it, remember? Every male in our generation has stuck a sausage in that freezer between your legs—even me."

Dina sucked in her breath, expanding her ribcage for the sole purpose of unleashing a slasher-worthy scream. If she did that, the whole neighborhood would come running, not to her aid—if Dad's stories about the pathological nosiness of his people were true (this from a man whose face doubled as one of those window stick-on toys whenever there was a strange noise in the street)—but to gawk. Greeks, Dad said, invented rubber-necking, long before Charles Goodyear invented vulcanized rubber in the late 1830s.

So I kicked her in the shin. Not hard. Just enough force to diffuse her before she blew.

"*Skeela*," she said.

Aunt Rita slapped her around the ear. "Don't talk to her like that."

These two. Jesus.

"I need to find my father," I said, wishing there was a hose handy. A blast of water would shoo them back to their respective corners. "If you can help …"

Hands on denim hips. "Maybe he ran away from you, did you consider that?"

Nope. Because men who ran away from their families usually did it alone, without the mobster entourage escorting them out of the house.

"If you know anything, it would really be helpful." I prepared to slather it on thick. *Sorry, Mom*. "Dad would be grateful, I know. Really, *really*, grateful."

She was considering the delicious possibility, the gleaming potential of a penitent and obligated Dad, when her gaze slid past us, bumping into Xander on the other side of the fence. "A henchman?" she said panicking, all signs of cooperation evaporating in Greece's relentless heat. "Why did you bring a henchman to my house? Help!" She glanced from side to side. "Help!"

"I thought you were already dead," I said.

"Dead, yes. But I can still feel torture."

"Relax," I assured her. "Xander isn't going to torture you. He's our ride."

She bolted up the steps, slammed her front door. "Help," she said in a much dimmer voice.

There I was, standing my father's kooky ex's yard, blinking at my aunt and Grandma's hottie henchman.

"Huh," Aunt Rita said.

"Anyone have a pen and paper?"

She went mining in her structured handbag, its loops nestled in her elbow's crook. She dug up with a lipstick in violent red. No paper.

The front door was still closed—and locked, I was willing to bet.

"Thanks. What's Grandma's phone number?"

She reeled off a short string of digits. One at a time, I painted them on the front door in MAC's Ruby Woo.

"Help! Vandals!" the woman inside hollered.

"Jesus. Is she always like this?"

Aunt Rita scoffed. "No. This is a good day." She dropped the lipstick back into her purse, then Xander drove us back to the family compound, where Grandma was pounding the life out of something with a marble mortar and pestle. Smelled like garlic, looked like grits.

She didn't bother looking up when we trudged in. "What did Dina

say?"

"Nothing," Aunt Rita said.

"You know how Dina is. Maybe she knows something, maybe not."

"Want us to pick her up?"

Grandma thought about it for a moment. "No. We know where she lives."

I rubbed my hands together. "Who are we going to see next?"

"You will never find Michail knocking on doors," Grandma said. "Our enemies are smart. Maybe they will answer questions, but they will not tell the truth. They have no honor." Because the head of one of Greece's organized crime syndicates is a reliable moral barometer. "For now you must be patient. Whoever has him, they will make their demands soon."

"And if they don't?"

"The *skordalia* is ready." She poured the garlic goop into a bowl, sealed it with plastic wrap and stuck it in the fridge. "Tomorrow I will fry fish."

What else could I do? I wasn't exactly bad-guy material, despite the distinctive bend on one side of the family tree. Threats and torture weren't my way. At work my catchphrase was, "Can you pay this past-due bill at this time?" not, "Pony up the goods or die." Although I have heard stories about people in my line of work who stoop. *Can't pay the three cents you owe? No problem. We'll come over and snatch your firstborn this afternoon.*

As soon as she shuffled outside to crochet and gab with the wives, I grabbed the phone and called the only non-Family—capital F—member I knew in Greece.

Detective Melas picked up. "Are you calling on the home phone again?"

"Yes. Don't hang up—please!"

Big sigh. "What do you want?"

"Information." I told him about my visit to Dad's ex's house, told him what Grandma had said about her enemies and knocking on doors. Then I begged him to give me something—anything."

"No," he said. "Forget it. I'm the good guy. What kind of good guy would I be if I helped you get yourself killed? You want my help? Let me drive you to the airport."

"No. Staying. Even if I had a passport I'd stay."

"Lady, you've got a death wish."

"*La la la.* I can't hear you. Does that sound familiar?"

His voice dropped to an agitated whisper. "Your father isn't one of the good guys, Katerina. When he lived here he did bad things. I'm not telling you anything else. It isn't worth my life or my job. But the offer for a ride to the airport is always open. We can stop by the US

Embassy in Athens and get you a passport."

I dumped the phone in its cradle, then went in search of my cell phone. Thirty minutes—and a minor skirmish with a customer service rep that I, by some miracle, won—later, I called him back.

"Melas," the detective said.

"It's Katerina."

"Ready to go to the airport?"

"Not going. I'm calling you on my cell phone. It's safe. Talk."

"Jesus," he said, "You're gonna get me killed. Okay. Jesus." He went silent for minute. "They say your father did wet work for your grandmother. You know what that is?"

"Who said?"

"Everyone. Old cops. Retired and dead."

I wondered how dead cops could say anything, but I didn't ask in case there was a blindingly obvious answer. "What's wet work?" It didn't sound good, whatever it was.

"What's wet?" he asked me.

"Water."

"Blood," he said. "Blood is wet. Wet work is murder. Assassination. Anything where blood is spilled. That's what your father did."

The room spun. My ears went all buzzy. "He's a truck driver."

Through the sudden static in my head Melas said, "Maybe he is, maybe he isn't. But he wasn't always a truck driver."

"Oh boy." Where the ceiling used to be there were now hundreds of black spots zinging into each other the way bumper cars do when they're being steered by drunks. "When you said he was Grandma's right fist I assumed you meant he did paperwork."

"That's Rita's job."

I chewed on my lip while I did some fast thinking. Whatever Dad used to do, he was still Dad. "Doesn't matter. I'm not going home until I find him."

"There's no record of his entry. He might not even be in Greece."

"If not Greece, then where?"

"He could still be in America. Why is your family so sure he's here?"

"Wait—how do you know there's no record?"

"Your grandmother had us check."

"Isn't that against some kind of good-guy code or something?"

"Just because we're on opposite teams, doesn't mean we don't sometimes borrow a cup of sugar."

"What about the ex girlfriend?"

"Dina? Forget her," he said. "She's a fruit."

I considered the angles—all two of them. "Maybe he went into protective custody. A witness protection thing."

"You believe that you'll believe anything." There was a pause. I pictured him scratching his head. "You're taking this well."

"Window dressing. On the inside I'm totally crazy."

"You give good window." He sounded dubious.

"So what do you think? Give me something, Detective Melas. Anything."

He sighed again. I'd pushed the guy into using up his yearly allotment of exasperation. "I think someone wants something and they're going to use him to get it. And I think he's in Greece, but he came in via a backdoor, same as you."

"Who can do that?"

"Money can cut a gordian knot faster than a sword."

"So whoever did this has a lot money?"

"Maybe even more than your family. If we can't find him and your grandmother can't either, then we're talking a lot of power. Wherever he is, they're hiding him well, and they'll keep doing that until they can use him. But from the stories I've heard about your father, I bet he's doing everything he can to escape. He's a resourceful man. Now do yourself a favor and go home."

"Never give up, never surrender," I said, and after thanking him, I punched END.

Now what?

With my phone at my disposal, I had a link to the outside world that didn't take a detour through my family.

Where to start? Where it all began, of course: With my Family—capital F—and whoever was their numero uno enemy.

I flopped back on my borrowed bed and got busy scouring the internet.

The internet turned out to be a real know-it-all when it came to organized crime. I typed in what I wanted to know, and it coughed up the name of Grandma's biggest local nemesis. His name was George Kefalas, and he—among other things—was one of the country's biggest producers of table olives and olive oil. Kefalas Olives's main factory was nearby, in one of the city's beachside suburbs. An image search showed him to be a well-preserved mid-seventies man who enjoyed shaking hands with important-looking people.

His grudge against Grandma originated with a political dispute. About what, the internet didn't say. But the two families were enemies—sworn enemies, as far as Kefalas was concerned. Grandma didn't strike me as someone who divided enemies into sworn and not-sworn piles.

My first stop was going to be Kefalas Olives, but not until tomorrow. Jet lag was gunning for me, and it was coming on fast.

For a moment the world was cotton candy-filled, chocolate-scented, and I had my own pony I'd named Delilah. Then the sun snuck into the bedroom and punched me in the eyes. I'd fallen asleep with the shutters open, and now I was paying the price. Something had crawled into my mouth to die during the night. It was currently decomposing on my tongue. Ugh.

The house was deserted again, so I made coffee, ate a piece of the hairy baklava on the counter, then cleaned up after myself. Fed and freshly caffeinated, I hit the shower and planned Operation Kefalas.

Grandma wasn't going to just let me have a car—not to go schmoozing with her enemies— so I rented one of my own online, with GPS and enough insurance to cover another Baby Dimitri molotov cocktail.

Walking through the gate was bound to come with a serving of uncomfortable questions, and maybe orders to sit and stay. So erring on the side of caution, I snuck out of the house and scaled the compound wall. They made it easy for me: lots of finger and footholds.

After a short hike through the orchards surrounding the property, I caught the bus to Volos, riding alongside an old woman with a bag of live chickens. Every so often they'd jostle about in the bag, their clucking bewildered. Probably they'd heard horror stories about soup and pie back in the yard, and now they were thinking this soup thing didn't seem so bad. Poor, stupid chickens.

A half hour—and a stack of paperwork later—the tiny Toyota Yaris was mine-ish, and I was wending my way along the Pagasetic Gulf's beachside road, bound for Agria, a small village that had been recently gulped down by the city.

Pretty place. Very touristy. Lots of semi-naked people strolling around, collecting rays. Just a wild guess, but the tanned bodies were locals, while the white and red had to be out-of-towners, here to cultivate their very own melanomas.

The talking map—which I'd silenced with the stab of a button—told me to hike left at the next corner. So, seeing no reason to get all creative and disobey it, I took the next left and found myself on a street without all the spit polish of the promenade. This one was a mixture of warehouses and smallish factories, most of them with sad, graffitied faces. The place stunk like Brooklyn in early August. Garbage, or something like it. The Kefalas Olive factory was hogging

the corner, giant wood door raised halfway, like it couldn't figure out if it was closed or open for business.

I parked at the curb, under the pathetic shade of a wannabe tree, jogged across the street, stuck my head under the door.

"Hello?"

This was the source of the stink. The factory was pouring an olive brine river into the street, where the hot road and sun were rotting it fast. The place looked empty, what I could see of it.

Something bit my ass. I yelped and jumped in the same moment, bashing my head on the sliding door.

My survival instincts told me to hit first, ask questions when it was too late and I was already in handcuffs, but my customer service training kicked in, limiting my reaction to a primal yell. Two young guys swaggered to a stop as I roared. They blew me kisses, wolf whistled. Barely out of middle school, the two of them.

"Jesus Christ," I muttered.

Both kids had music video hair, gelled into fauxhawks. The one closest to me smirked as he dragged his gaze up and down my body like he was painting a fence. "You don't have to call me Jesus Christ in public. Save it for when you're on my dick."

"Where are your mothers?" I shouted.

The other kid looked at his buddy. "My sister's a bitch when she's bleeding, too."

I launched into them, describing in great detail what I'd do if I was truly my grandmother's granddaughter. By the time they started moving again, their grins were dead and they'd lost some of that swagger.

Did I feel guilty?

Yep.

Must have been the good Greek girl buried inside me. The one buried inside the gangster's kid. Concealed under the all-American slick of makeup. A regular Russian nesting doll. Just two days ago, I'd been the average slightly lower than middle class American woman. Today I was one of the Corleone grandkids. Which made my father one of the Corleone kids. Hopefully not Sonny or Fredo. Spoiler alert: Nothing good happened to those poor saps.

On the other side of the door, inside the olive factory, something moved. More of a feeling than a sound. Someone—or something—knew I'd come calling. Which wasn't exactly a surprise. It's why I'd called out. I wasn't exactly shooting for stealth. Still, now I was wishing I'd brought a flamethrower, because I couldn't help thinking about—of all places—Japan.

When people's minds turn to horrifying, deadly creatures, usually the first place that pops into their heads is Australia. Okay, Australia *is*

filled with snakes, spiders, and jellyfish that want to murder you, but they're working slowly. New Zealand is shipping over fresh meat faster than the wildlife can whack 'em.

But me, my first thought is always Japan. Because they have the hornet to end all hornets (and other living creatures): the Japanese giant hornet, or as they call it in their home country, the giant sparrow bee. It can be the length of a finger and as thick as two. It will puncture you with its stinger. It will holler for all its hornet buddies. And together they will kill you. Why? Because why not? Unless you're a Japanese honey bee, and you've got five hundred or so Japanese honey bee buddies to cook and suffocate the hornet to death, you don't stand a chance.

I was thinking about it now, because that noise, that movement in the factory, was exactly how I imagined a massive Japanese giant hornet attack would start. Given that I was thousands of miles away from Asia, my common sense knew it couldn't possibly be Japanese giant hornets. But my base self—the part that, after all that evolution, still had only one foot out of the primordial ooze and one foot in because it wasn't convinced it was safe out here—told me those hornets might have European cousins.

What a sissy, right?

I ducked under the door, trying not to smash my skull this time. Light painted part of a pale square on the concrete floor, then quit before finishing the job.

"Hello?" I called out again, fully expecting to be ignored a second time.

But I wasn't. Whatever had moved in here had suddenly found its voice, which crossed European giant hornets off my list.

"What do you want?"

I shoved away the bowl of cowardly custard wobbling inside my chest. "I'm looking for George Kefalas."

"Dead."

Poof! That was the sound of my lead evaporating. "Oh. I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry that *poutsokleftis* is dead?"

A shadow stepped into the thin light. A big shadow. A freighter of a man. Small, mean eyes, thin lips, vocal cords that had been tossed into a rock tumbler along with a handful of glass. Skin the color of a gingerbread man. Face that could take a week-long beating without looking worse. Dark blue overalls covered him from neck to boots. Didn't look like he moved fast, but when he did move it was with calculated, deadly precision. My brainstem fired a warning shot, but I was trying to decide if his calling George Kefalas a *dick thief* was literal or figurative.

"What do you want with George Kefalas?" he went on.

I planted myself on the concrete—hard—and tried not to look like a dull roar could blow me away. My hand I offered without wincing. "Katerina Makris."

"Where'd you get the s?"

"America."

He did the math, came up with a number that smeared a greasy smirk across his mouth. "You belong to the old bitch."

No need to ask which old bitch he meant. I only knew one in Greece, though she wasn't exactly showing me her bitch card. I was, after all, her only granddaughter.

"And you are?"

"Nobody you want to know. But maybe you will know me anyway."

Deadpan: "Long name. How's that fit on your driver's license?"

Either he didn't get the joke or he was born without a funny bone. "They call me the Baptist."

Until then, he'd ignored my hand. When he accepted the offer, his hand was cool and dry. Snakeskin.

"Like The Edge? Or just Edge? Or the Edge? Because there's a difference."

Nothing. I guess he didn't know U2. Okay, next question. "Who is they?"

"People."

The question came out on its own. I tried to hold it back, but sometimes my mouth, it just does things without permission. "Did you kill him?"

"Who, Kefalas?"

"Forget I asked." The disclaimer rushed out with a *whoosh*.

"Maybe I don't want to forget it, eh? It's a good question." He swung around, still holding my hand, looked at the huge shapes near the rear of the factory floor. As my pupils adjusted, I saw they were vats, probably meant for curing olives. "You could say George Kefalas killed himself."

I jerked my hand away. "The Baptist? Why do they call you that?"

His throat and lungs rattled, then he spat on the ground, a big shiny oyster of a glob. "You never answered my question. What do you want with Kefalas?"

Spine straight, I tried to look as intimidating as a hundred-and-twenty-something-pound woman can look. "If you're not Kefalas then it's not your business."

"Not my business," he said, smile in his voice. "But it could be. So how about you tell me what you know."

When did we switch sides? Wasn't I supposed to be the one asking questions? Yep, pretty sure of it. "When did George Kefalas die?"

Nothing.

"Did he have any visitors lately? Maybe visitors in handcuffs?"

Silence. A whole lot of it.

"Did he maybe send some of his guys to America?"

The back of my neck prickled. Kefalas Olives was on a regular street so it was no surprise that there was some traffic (foot, bicycle, motorcycle, and cars) at my back. But this was something else. I was being watched. Or someone was eavesdropping on this mostly one-sided conversation. Whoever they were they were adding to my already chronic case of the willies.

The Baptist smiled. Probably he was the kind of guy no one wanted to see smile. He seemed like a man who got his jollies when people begged for mercy.

"You want to see George Kefalas? I'll take you to see George Kefalas."

Wow, what an offer.

"I'm not really good with dead people," I said. "But if he comes back to life, let me know."

"Most people in your position would want to see he's dead for themselves. In your family's business they like proof of death."

"You know what, if you say he's dead then I believe you." I wouldn't swallow anything else he told me, but that I believed.

"Dead, alive, maybe Kefalas can still help you."

Only a few feet stood between me and the outdoors, but if I dived for it I'd probably get concrete rash. Would it be worth it? Definitely. "Gee, I'd love to, but my ride is waiting."

"No ride." His smile went away. His voice took on a metal edge. "You came alone."

A bucket of ice emptied into my gut. I tried to ignore my bladder's sudden nagging. I pulled my phone out of my hip pocket, checked messages that weren't there.

"Got to go, otherwise my grandmother's henchmen are going to come looking for me." I bolted for the door. He was quicker. His fingers snapped around my wrist like a metal cuff. He squeezed until the bones sang. Tears flooded my eyes.

"Did I say you could go?"

"I wasn't asking for permission."

The emptiness of the factory thickened. All this equipment, all those offices upstairs around the rim of the factory floor, not a living soul in one of them who'd come to my rescue. If I didn't save myself, who would?

Nobody. That's who.

"Look," I said, trying to reason with my first—and hopefully last—psychopath. "I don't have a problem with you. I don't care why you're

here or what you did to George Kefalas—if anything. I'm just looking for my father, and I was hoping Kefalas might know something. If Kefalas is dead and you can't help me, let me go find somebody who can."

The Baptist shoved me away from him. *Aww, Jesus—further away from the door.*

"Maybe I can't help you with your father problem, but maybe I can help you with something else. The Baptist is good at fixing problems." His gaze took a tour of my curves, taking a short break on my boobs before returning to my face. "You got a problem you want me to fix?"

He was the problem I wanted fixed—fixed like a dog. Despite the fact that I was potentially about to have lunch, dinner, and breakfast with Mom, I almost laughed. Thinking about getting a dog fixed always reminded me of Gary Larson's *The Far Side* cartoons. I pictured the Baptist hanging his head out a car window, crowing about how he was going to get tutored.

"Are you scared of the Baptist? Worried I might show you how I got the name? That's good. Scared is where you should be."

I had nothing. No gun, no pepper spray, no knife.

No hairspray.

Just my luck to be born not long before mall bangs collapsed, otherwise I could have Aqua Netted the guy into an asthma attack. Why hadn't I raided the compound's armory before sneaking out? Did the compound even have an armory?

If I survived this I'd have to find out.

Who knew if I could even shoot the guy if I had a gun?

"I'm going now," I said.

"Who said you could go? You're not going anywhere until I say. And I haven't said." His breath inched up my nose. A lot of garlic and something sour. His face contorted, and for a moment I imagined him as a slick skull, straight out of a horror movie. His mouth could open and I'd magically vanish, never to be heard from again.

This time he grabbed me by the ponytail, twisting it in his fist until I yelped. What flashed in front of my eyes wasn't my life—just parts of it. The bits where I'd sat too close to the television, mostly. That had nothing to do with what I did next. Understand that if there had been any other choice I'd have taken it, but sometimes you just have to hit a man where it really freakin' hurts.

My fist shot out, nailing him square in the twig and berries.

He gagged, dropping to his knees, hands on crotch.

Time for a getaway—or so I thought. the Baptist lunged forward, snaking his meaty hand around my ankle. *Bam.* I kissed the concrete floor—with teeth and tongue and both lips. Up close, the caustic brine stench burned my eyes. That hand reeled me in, dragging my body

along the rough surface. I clawed at the ground but I wasn't moving forward. Out of luck. Almost out of time.

A gun bit into the silence.

Two shots.

The hand pulling me stopped. Dimly, as though through a closed door, I heard boots beating the ground—running, I decided, away from me. Away was good. I leopard crawled toward the factory door, hoping those bullets weren't meant for me. I really didn't have any place to put them.

Another bullet whizzed past my head. Then a hand reached out, grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, pulled me into the standing position. I squealed and flailed, then I went limp where I saw who had me.

Xander. He'd busted in like the Terminator, and apparently I had to go with him if I wanted to live. Except he said nothing, the way he always did. All the noise was coming from me. I'd cornered the market on whimpering.

No sign of the Baptist, so now seemed like a good idea to bolt back to my car, in case he decided Xander was out of ammo. Except I wasn't going anywhere: Xander still had a grip on my neck. I was hanging there like a kitten.

"Help," I whispered.

My voice box had quit on me after that last scream. My face was slippery with sweat, my pits, too. Those smoldering women gyrating on dance floors in antiperspirant commercials never met the Baptist, I'd bet. I reeked of decaying olive brine and fear.

Xander didn't seem to give a toss. He tucked me under his arm like I was luggage, carried me down the street, my hair and limbs dangling. Which left me to alternate bargaining with threatening the deities of all the major and minor religions I could recall on short notice. Which turned out to be quite a few, although—I suspected—some of them were characters from Pratchett's *Discworld* novels.

He jagged left at the next street, toward, I realized, the factory's rear. Not cool. I wanted to be moving *away* from the Baptist, not closer.

I might have said something unintelligible like, "Arrrrgh."

The narrow street contained a small clutch of shops, where people were going about their business and—being Greek—everyone else's. I tried lifting my head, but gravity was working against me. I suppose I could have screamed for help, but this was what passed for help in my messed up family.

Xander stopped at the mouth of the narrow alley that ran behind the factory and its neighbors, and plonked me on the ground. It was empty aside from the dumpsters cozied up to the walls. The air was

lifeless. Here the stench of garbage was almost physical. Every breath I took meant I was inhaling someone's decaying leftovers. Guess the sea breeze couldn't stick its finger in here and stir.

Xander dragged me into the upright position, slammed my back against the crumbling stucco and stone wall. My skull bounced once. When reality swam back in I saw his face was painted with anger, his eyes were black and cold.

He said nothing—he never did—but his meaning was clear: I was an idiot for going into the factory alone. He was right, but I'd rather lick the ground in this alley than admit it. Instead of a verbal beating, he shook me hard enough that my teeth bit down on my tongue. I tasted metal and salt.

"I hate you," I said in two languages, wishing I knew a third.

A door opened several feet away. My entire body seized. It wanted to run, and would have if it wasn't busy being pinned to a wall.

"I thought I told you to go home."

Detective Melas. He stepped into the alley, no sign of his uniform this time. He was in ass-kicking boots, jeans, and he'd topped it off with a T-shirt that proclaimed his love for the Scorpions.

My humiliation was complete. I blame that for what came out of my mouth next.

"It's your fault I'm here."

Normally I'm not one to point the finger. I go through life wearing my big-girl panties hitched high. But that's back home, where people threaten to wring my neck but lack the technology to do it via the phone. Here I was going commando.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" he demanded.

"I was doing your job." I shot Xander my best stink-eye, then swiveled it left a few inches. "And yours. No one else is looking for my father."

"Did you find him?" Melas asked.

"No."

"Of course you didn't. Your father's not here. He never was. And George Kefalas is dead." He looked at Xander. "He's floating in one of the vats. All that saline, it's like the Dead Sea."

"That's what he said."

"Who?" He shot an inquiring glance at Xander, but Xander was busy not talking.

"The Baptist," I told him. "He told me Kefalas was dead."

"Jesus Christ." He rubbed his forehead. "The Baptist."

"What? Who is he? Besides evil. I got that part already."

"Jesus Christ. This I need. Of all the people you could have antagonized …"

"Hey!" I was pinned to the wall but I could still point. And I did. I

pointed so hard I almost punched a hole in the air. "*He* antagonized *me*. I wasn't even looking for him. He just … happened to be here. Did he kill Kefalas? Because it kind of sounded like he did."

Xander dropped me. I landed with a small thump, then shook myself off, straightened my clothes, tried to regain some dignity. But it's so hard to look cool when you've been hand-stapled to a wall.

Detective Melas shrugged. "Don't know yet. But somebody killed him."

"So, we done here?" I crab-walked along the alley, aiming for the sunshine I knew was in the street. "Thanks for the rescue, guys." Then I stopped. Turned. "Wait a minute …" Now that the adrenaline was ebbing, my clarity was flooding back. Math happened and the answers seemed right. "Were you two following me?"

"He was," Melas said, nodding to the other guy.

My eyes narrowed. "What's your excuse?"

"None of your business."

"If it's about my father's kidnapping, it kind of is my business."

"It's not," he said. "Take her home." That was for Xander. "And by home I mean America. Take her to the airport and make sure she gets on a plane."

"I don't have a passport, remember?"

"So get one."

"You're not the boss of me."

"I'm not, am I?" His eyes grazed my body as he said it. "We'll see."

"Can't be the boss of me if I'm back in America."

A wicked grin spread itself slowly across his face. "Honey, once a man's the boss of you, he's the boss of you anywhere. Oceans be damned."

My mouth fell open. I could feel it hanging there in the thick, stagnant air. If I didn't snap it shut soon the drooling would start. He'd take that compliment. Melas struck me as that kind of guy.

Get away from him, that's what I had to do. Not only did I stink, but now my ass was seriously chapped.

"I'm going now." On one boot heel, I swiveled and exited the alley stage right. It took all my restraint not to flip them off.

They followed. Of course they did. So predictable and overbearing.

My everything hurt. Belly-flopping onto the concrete will do that. But there was no way I was going to show these two my sissy card. I girded my woman loins, adjusted my girl-balls, took strong confident steps when my knees were on red alert, warning me of their imminent collapse. Still it wasn't a struggle for the men to keep up.

I turned the corner.

Blinked.

Rental car?

Gone.

Nothing left of it but a *Yaris*-sized patch of fresh air and sunshine. That didn't slow me down. I stomped over to where I'd left the car, stood there scratching my tender scalp. All that hair pulling, I was lucky to have hair left.

No doubt about it: somebody had David Copperfielded my ride.

"I hate Greece," I said to no one in particular.

Melas leaned against a different car, one that wasn't mine, big grin on his face. "That's what Xerxes said. He got smart and went home."

I turned in a small circle. No sign of the car. No sign of Xander. Somewhere between here and the alley he'd vanished.

Not for long. A car pulled up alongside us. Motorcycle gone to the racing track in the sky, Xander was now driving a black bullet. Some kind of vehicle I didn't recognize. Lots of smaller cars here. Fuel efficient. Even smaller than the cars we loved in Portland.

Home … I wanted to go there.

"Tell me something and try not to lie," I told the cop.

"I never lie."

"Except when you do, right?"

Palms up. "Sometimes it comes with the job."

"What does he do for my family?"

"The quiet guy?"

Quiet? Oh no, no, no. Xander was more than quiet. The man was a silent movie.

I nodded.

"What doesn't he do?"

"That sounds like a warning."

"Honey, your whole family should come with a warning label. And I'm not convinced you shouldn't, either."

Xander reached across the passenger seat, flung the door open. He didn't tell me to get in, but the hardness of his expression screamed, *Get or I'll get you in.*

I flopped into the seat. Xander reached over me with the belt, clicked it shut. Was he wearing one? Nope. Double standards sucked.

Detective Melas went to slam the door, but I shoved a boot into his path.

"Wait. Where's my car? I bought insurance, but—"

"The car's fine. Stay in your grandmother's house until you can get to the airport. If your father's alive, we'll find him."

Acid bubbled into my stomach, turning my mood even more sour. "And if he's not?"

"Then he'll probably find us. These guys like a good game of show-and-tell."

"But where's my c—"

"On its way back to the rental place." Then he slammed the door. Conversation over.

I turned to the silent knight in the driver's seat. No longer glaring at me, he was focused on some distant point.

A moped putt-putted past, then Xander chucked a U-turn, taking us back the way I originally came.

"My father's not dead."

Silence.

"I'd know if he was."

He reached over, flicked on radio. Greek music filled the car. Lots of tinny bouzouki and a wailing alto voice only a cat in heat could love. The lyrics I understood—something about a sea captain catching squid—but … ugh, the aural assault.

With one finger, I stabbed the tuner, feeling satisfied when it leaped to a Top 20 station.

The car jerked to a stop. Xander climbed out.

When the car started again, I was in the backseat, cuffed to the handgrip. I couldn't even spit on the radio tuner from here.

Chapter 7

GRANDMA WAS COOKING up what was looking to be a normal storm. Fried whole fish by the dozens, each of them no more than four inches long. I looked at the fish. They looked back.

What was it with Greeks leaving the eyes in their food?

"Katerina, my love, why would you go to see George Kefalas?"

"Google told me to." I reached for one of the twisty *koulouraki* cookies stacked on the counter.

"Tell this Google he almost got you killed. the Baptist, that is what he does. Kill, kill, kill." Grandma smacked the cookie out of my hand. It skittered across the countertop. Weren't grandmothers supposed to be kindly and sweet? Mine was shaping up to be somewhere between Mary Poppins and that hose-beast from *Flowers in the Attic*. "If you eat *koulouraki*, how will you be hungry for lunch?"

"I'll manage."

There was a soft chuffing behind me. I swung around to see Xander laughing.

My jaw unhinged. It took me a moment to snap it back into place. "You can't talk but you can laugh?"

Grandma gave him a look and he melted out of the kitchen, cake box crammed full of *koulouraki* in his hands. Not fair.

"Why doesn't he talk?"

"If you want to know that you should ask him."

Very funny.

Now that I didn't have an audience, I limped to the bathroom—the toilet-less bathroom. I stripped, stood in the bathtub while hot water blasted life back into my body. By the time I got out I was as boneless as a jellyfish. My belly was already turning a purplish black, the color of gangrene. My elbows were skinned. My dignity I'd left somewhere on the olive factory floor.

Like the aforementioned jellyfish, I drifted to the bedroom, stopping when I collided with the bed.

Nice bed. Good bed. Who's a good bed? You are, bed. You are.

To prove my love for the mattress, I fell into its arms belly up and began sifting through the guts of the morning, hunting for signs.

Aside from my mother dying prematurely when I was on the verge of womanhood, life had been pretty good to me. Up until two days ago. First my father had been kidnapped—excuse me, escorted from his house in a nefarious manner—then two buffoons had somehow

managed to outsmart me and bundle me into a plane without my consent. That was just the top of the slide. That spiteful little voice inside me kept yammering about how the bottom of the slide emptied onto hard concrete or gravel, not the soft, spongey black stuff or wood chips usually found in playgrounds these days, now that kids were made of glass. That same voice also mentioned that this morning's incident with the Baptist probably wasn't the slide's end point, either.

In the moment I'd been terrified, but I'd also had adrenaline helping me out, pumping me full of bravado. It was a temporary bonus that had faded when the boss fight was over. Now, I just felt tiny and scared.

Detective Melas and my grandmother were right: the Baptist could have killed me.

But he didn't, because unbeknownst to me, I'd brought along the cavalry. Must have been Grandma's doing. She'd had Xander follow me.

Not cool—although I was grateful for the bacon-saving. I was a grown woman who didn't need grandparental permission to go hunting for my own father. She wasn't exactly out there shaking the olive trees, so somebody had to. Already I'd made progress. My list had dwindled by three names. All my grandmother had achieved by sending her silent stalker was ensuring that no one in the family—or the Family—would take me seriously.

Okay, so I was still alive, so she had achieved that, too.

But I wasn't quitting. Car or no car, I was still hellbent on finding my father. He'd never stop if I was missing. We were all the other had.

But next time, I was going in armed. All right, so I knew nothing about guns except which end to point at the bad guy, but I could learn. Could I do it, could I shoot someone?

Undecided.

I was pretty sure I could sink a bullet into a body part that didn't count too much, like a finger or toe. That would buy me a getaway if necessary, I was sure.

On second thought, maybe the armory—if we had one—had something non-lethal. This afternoon I'd hunt down Stavros and beg him to pony up the location of the armory.

The door flew open. Pain slapped me as I jumped up.

Grandma.

"What for are you still in here? Come and eat."

Another day, another party. Most of the family had assembled itself at long tables in the courtyard. Cousins and wives, kids and animals.

Dress was casual with a side of firearm.

My grandmother noticed the guns, too. She pressed her lips together until they became pale slugs. After a long, drawn-out stretch of disapproval, during which everyone failed to take the hint, she spoke.

"What did I say about bringing guns to the table? Civilized people do not bring guns to a meal. Not in my family. Not in my house. What are we? Turks? Put them away—now!"

All the little soldiers scurried away to do her bidding. Their wives stayed, totally unperturbed by the interruption. Must have been a regular thing.

Stavros and Takis were still at the table. They'd come unarmed.

Takis looked at me with a grin too big for his face. Any wider and his lid would pop off. "Hey, Katerina, you know why a woman's holes are so close together?"

"Ugh," I said.

He hooked a thumb at Xander, who was three seats down from him. "So Xander here can carry them like a six-pack."

His wife walloped him around the head.

"I hate you," I told him. "Seriously hate you."

I hate him, too, Marika mouthed.

Takis grinned at me. "Congratulations, now you are truly part of the family."

I wasn't sure if he meant the family or the Family, so I raised my hand, palm out, fingers slightly splayed. "High five."

Yes, on purpose. It had been that kind of day.

"*Gamo ti Panayia mou!"* Takis howled. "What did we tell you in America? Never show a Greek your open hand like that."

Marika hit him again, this time for sexual atrocities against the Virgin Mary. "Ouch," he said, "What the fuck is wrong with you?" Another slap.

"Our children are playing over there," she said, using her hands to punctuate. "Why you talk like that around children? What is wrong with you?"

"You are forgetting your place," he told her.

"Keep talking," she warned him. "Your place will be a sad apartment with fold-out couch. Do you want to be like Stavros?"

"I don't want to be like Stavros," Stavros said from further down the table.

When Marika was done with him, I got started. "You just made a joke about my body, but my jokes aren't acceptable? I don't get it."

Takis shrugged. "Of course you don't, you're a woman."

Aunt Rita slid into place opposite me. She gasped when she saw my injuries. "My baby, what happened to you?"

"It was nothing. Just some guy called the Baptist."

Conversation stopped. And by *stopped* I meant *died*, like I'd just shot it out of the air with a missile. An uncomfortable silence sat itself on our heads, settling in for the long haul.

"The Baptist?" Takis squeaked, after a short eternity had passed.

I shrugged. "That's what he called himself. Why?"

"No reason." He shrugged. "Just making conversation."

"In the old days, I used to sneak out with a girl everybody called the Baptist," Papou said, rolling into place to Grandma's left. He still had his shotgun, but the thing wasn't loaded anyway. "She could breathe through her ears."

Nobody looked at him.

Grandma glanced up at the sky. "God, Zeus, whoever is listening, now would be a good time to take him."

One by one, the chairs refilled as the family men returned, sans weapons. All but one.

That one empty seat was to my right.

"What's with the empty chair?" Suddenly, everyone was busy ignoring me. "What's going on?"

"Nothing is going on," Grandma said in a breezy sort of voice that convinced me she was a lying hound.

A vehicle crunched up the driveway, dying in front of the compound. I couldn't see it, but we all heard abrupt the death rattle.

My eyes narrowed. "Who is it?"

"Nobody."

Somebody.

"Just somebody I invited," she went on.

A-ha! See?

"Everybody has to eat," she explained. "What could I do, let a man go hungry?"

The hungry nobody wandered into the courtyard a moment later, entourage at his back. He had fifteen years on me, ten inches, and zero pounds. The summer sun was on high beam, yet he was in a three-piece suit with a gangster shine. An oil-dipped comb had slicked his black hair to the left. He looked like a man who gave orders that other people followed.

Every male muscle at the table stiffened.

"Who is it?" I asked.

Papou cackled into his drink. "I think your grandmother is trying to marry you off."

She put on her innocent old lady face. "What? He is a guest. Treat him with respect. Talk to him. Maybe flirt a little, eh? And do not let him see your skinned elbows. I want him to think you are a good girl."

"I am a good girl—uh, woman."

Aunt Rita crossed herself. *Just in case*, she mouthed.

"I don't want to be set up," I said. "I can find a man myself."

"My love—"

A quick note: Greeks don't say, "My love." They say, "Love my."

Okay, back to Grandma.

"—if you could find a man you would be married already. But here you are, twenty-eight, and still no husband."

I stood. "Going now."

"Fine. Go. But do not touch the *koulouraki* in the kitchen or I will cut off your hand."

I sat back in my seat. Still warm. "Now that I've thought about it, I've decided to stay."

Papou nodded at the new arrival. "Who is this clown?"

"This is Yianni Papagalos," Grandma said, making introductions.

Papagalos, for the record, means *parrot*.

The old man beamed. "Papagalos, eh? Do you *squawk squawk* like the *papagalos*?" He tucked both hands in his pits, flapped his new featherless wings. "Hey," he called down the table. "Who has a cracker?"

Grandma's lunch guest didn't look happy. "They never found the last man who offered me a cracker."

Was Papou worried? Nope. He tore a small chunk off his bread, pitched it at the new arrival's head. His oily scalp accelerated its fall.

"You were supposed to catch it with your beak," Papou said, sounding disappointed.

"My Virgin Mary," Aunt Rita said, crossing herself again.

Yianni Papagalos ignored them both. He fixated on me. Just my luck.

"Is this her?" he asked.

Like I was a car or something. Was Grandma throwing in steak knives, too?

"Yes, this is my granddaughter Katerina. Sit, sit," Grandma said, ushering him to my side of the table.

He reeked of rubbing alcohol and he was invading my personal space.

Grandma started her sales pitch. "Yianni is in exports. He had a wife—two wives—but they died." Someone tittered at the far end of the table. She ignored it, but I could see the writing on that particular wall. It read: *For now*.

Yianni turned to me. "What do you do?"

I picked at my bread. At the rate I was going I'd be able to build a pretend snowman on my plate. "Customer service."

"You work with people?"

"Over the phone."

"She's a debt collector," Papou said. "She bullies people into giving her money."

Was it my imagination or did Yianni like that idea? His mouth settled into an approving line. Not quite a smile, but he'd make it so if I confessed to kicking puppies. I would *never* kick a puppy, but if this guy oozed any closer I'd consider elbowing a parrot.

"Not anymore," Grandma said. "There was a fire. Very unfortunate, but also lucky. Now she can get married."

Married? No. Hell no. "I'm not getting married any time soon. First I have to find my father, then I'm going back home to find another job."

"I think Katerina should stay here and be one of us," Papou crowed. "She already beat the Baptist this morning. And she survived one of Baby Dimitri's firebombs."

Every eye was on me. But did I look up? Nope. I squished the breadcrumbs together, made a head and a body, reached for a couple of toothpicks to give my breadman arms.

"You met the Baptist?" Yianni asked, incredulous.

"Not on purpose," I muttered.

"Katerina, why not tell a joke or something," Grandma said quickly.

Yianni looked at me. "I like jokes."

"I don't know any jokes," I said. "But Takis does. In fact, he told me one a few minutes ago. How did it go?"

Takis's laugh wobbled out. "What is she talking about? I don't know."

"Sure you do," I said, dunking him in the proverbial hot water. "Something about why a woman's holes are so close together."

He tugged at the neck of his shirt, his eyes shifty. "Heh. You are funny."

Yianni pulled out a gun, laid it on the table next to his fork. It was a big, shiny thing. Silver-plated. What was he hunting with that thing, werewolves?

"No guns at my dinner table." My grandmother said it in one of those commanding voices, very Moses and the Red Sea-like. Yianni picked up the gun, passed it back to a member of his entourage. The recipient was one of five. Same faces. Same black suits. Same black glasses. All of them pressed out of one piece of dough, using one cutter. The effect was spooky. I'd never seen that much blandness outside of an Abercrombie & Fitch.

"Speaking of guns," I said. "Can I have one, please?"

Yianni said, "Why do you want a gun? What does a woman need a gun for?"

Grandma was staring at me through narrow slits. There was thin ice and I was skating all over it. "Yes, Katerina, tell me. Why do you

want a gun?"

That should have been obvious, but I humored her anyway. "So I can shoot things. Or at them, at least. Or near them. I'd prefer not to kill anyone, so a Taser would be okay, too."

"No," my grandmother said. "No guns for you. No guns for anybody who does not already have a gun."

"I used to have a gun," Papou said. "Then I got old and it stopped working. Now, I have to get pills from the doctor when I want to shoot something."

Grandma looked up at the heavens, crossed herself. "Yianni, eat."

"Give the girl a gun," Aunt Rita said. "How else is she going to protect herself from the Baptist?"

"Protect myself from the Baptist? Wait." I looked around. "Is he going to come back for me?"

Silence.

"He always comes back," Yianni said. "That's what he does."

A lot of shivering happened—most of it from grown men.

My aunt dropped her fork on the plate. "No one else has balls enough to tell you, but I do. What happens at a baptism?"

I drew a blank. "Greek Orthodox?"

"Any baptism."

"They dunk you in water."

"And they give you your name," she explained. "But the Baptist, he doesn't give names, he gives numbers."

"What kind of numbers."

"Sequential numbers. If he gives you a number you're on his list. His death list."

Yikes. Good thing he never gave me a number. I would have remembered that. I think. I mean, who can really say? I was all caught up in freaking out at the time.

Pop Rocks fizzed in my stomach.

Grandma's mouth pursed up. She managed to pry it open wide enough to say, "Stop filling the girl's head with stories."

Yianni was staring at me, fear on his face. "Did he give you a number?"

"No." Probably not. Maybe not.

But he didn't look convinced. He pushed back from the table, shot his cuffs, tugged at the neck of his tightly-buttoned shirt. "I remembered I have somewhere to be." His face was waxy and the color of mashed potatoes.

"But you just got here," Papou said, grinning. "Stick around. We have birdseed."

"No, no, I have to go. I have a thing."

"What about my granddaughter?" Grandma demanded.

"Uh …" He glanced around for a handy excuse. "She'll be dead soon. I want to be a husband, not a widower for the third time."

"See," I said, appealing to the family. "I need a gun."

The family said nothing. They were all watching Yianni the Parrot scram, entourage dogging his heels.

Lunch wasn't a complete waste, even though it didn't end with a betrothal to the Parrot. The food was excellent (I covered the beady fish eyes with bread), the talk was interesting. I learned that there was an armory in the compound, but no one would say where. Grandma was so busy throwing out dark looks and threats that soon all talk of armories and giving me a gun sputtered to an early death.

Good thing there was more than one way to skin a cat, although I firmly believed a cat should never be skinned in the first place. Who does that?

I thought about it for a moment. Probably my Family—capital F. They didn't seem like cat people, although I'd seen a few very alive cats sunning in the courtyard.

Lunch over with, I did my share of dishes and cleaning up, then ducked into my room, where there was a goat standing dead center on the bed, chomping on a curtain. It was a brown and white lop-eared beast, and if it hadn't been chowing the furnishings I'd be going, *Awwww, look at the cute goat*!

I shut the door. Went back to the kitchen where Grandma was wiping down the spotless counter.

"There's a cute goat on my bed. It's eating the sheers. Did I mention it's cute?"

"A goat? How can there be a goat on your bed?"

Funny, I wondered the same thing. "Do you have a goat?"

"No. But it sounds like you do."

I went back to the bedroom. The goat was still there, still chewing.

"Get off the bed, stupid cute goat!"

The goat dropped the curtain, skipped across the bed, landing at my feet. It snuffled my pockets, then—finding nothing—went back to sheers.

No way could it stay. What if it went after the sheets next, or my clothes? I eyed the goat. It really was cute. Maybe even adorable. A goat like that had to belong to someone, but I was running out of steam fast. This jet lag thing really had me whooped. Times and dates felt fluid. I was in a lava lamp, that's where I was, with time rising and falling in big waxy blobs. Was it bedtime, was it playtime? I didn't know. All I knew was that Dad was still missing and I had an adorable

goat infestation.

I went back to the kitchen without the goat. "Any ransom notes or calls?"

"No."

"Anyone delivered a severed finger or any other body part?"

Grandma looked at me. "Who does that?"

"You?"

"Nobody accepts a finger as proof of life. It could be anybody's finger. For torture … cutting off a finger is nothing. You want to hurt somebody, pull out their fingernail."

Bile churned in my stomach. "Good to know," I said. "I was just checking. What should I do about the goat?"

"Put it outside. It will go home when it is ready."

The goat was going nowhere, and it was taking its sweet time doing that. I pushed, I pulled, I pleaded. I also might have tried to sing it out of the room.

"Is that you or the goat?" Grandma called out.

"The goat!"

In the end, I lured it out with tissues. The cloven beast seemed happy to relieve me of my pocket pack of Kleenex, and from the look in its slitted eyes when we got outside, it had big plans for Grandma's potted garden.

Back in the kitchen I said, "Don't you think it's weird that a goat was in the house?"

"No. I saw a cow in a kitchen once."

Greece isn't a country with a lot of cattle. Most of the terrain is better suited to more nimble-footed ruminants.

"How did that happen?"

"It came in through the door and got stuck inside. We had to make it walk backwards, and cows, they do not like to walk backwards."

I pondered the weirdness of cows in the kitchen and goats in the bedroom. "If security here is so amazing, how did a goat get into the compound?"

"A goat is not a person. How dangerous can it be?"

Seriously? Had this woman not heard the one about the Trojan Horse? Brad Pitt and company seemingly sailed away, abandoning their giant-sized wooden horse. The Trojans—relieved the Greeks were gone—went, "*Whoa! Free horse! Score!*" That free horse was kind of like gratis food on the streets of Bangkok: concealed inside was a nasty surprise. That Grandma would blow off a goat was mystifying. There could be anything inside. Not Greek soldiers—they wouldn't fit. Maybe something smaller.

But what did I know?

I was in bed with Google, trying to decide who was in the numero uno spot, now that the original placeholder had gone to Hades's giant underground olive factory. It wasn't easy. Would have been nice to have some help sorting the bad guys into piles, from most to least likely.

That's what I was thinking when I stumbled across the Crooked Noses Message Board, which claimed to specialize in information and the history of—you guessed it—organized crime. Topics were squared away in tidy sub-forums, divided by organization. The Cosa Nostra sat at the head of the class. A quick scan showed that everything was sorted according to publicity. Who had the most movies produced about them, the most novels, the most headlines in the newspapers.

The Greek Mafia was hanging near the bottom of the list, along with several of its equally unheard-of cronies.

I tapped. Maybe I'd never heard of the Greek mafia back home, but the sub-forum was active.

Greek Mafia Princess Comes Home.

Tap.

Gasp!

The thread was about me. And there were pictures.

In one I was stepping off the plane, looking dazed and in dire need of a hairbrush. Another showed me standing outside Baby Dimitri's shoes and souvenirs shop, watching Xander's motorcycle fry. In the third I was tucked under Xander's arm, moments before I yelled at him and Melas in the alley behind the Kefalas Olives factory. I didn't mind that one so much. My butt looked good and you couldn't see my face.

The comments were loaded with useful and benevolent suggestions. They wanted me to (in no particular order) die, burn, spend eternity in prison, and sleep with the fishes—if sleeping meant shoving seafood up my butt and uploading the video to PornTube.

It wasn't all bad news. A few dissenting voices had proposed a wait-and-see approach. I had—they decided—no history of legal or illegal shenanigans (they admitted to running a background check), so they'd give me a free pass—for now. But I had the feeling if I even looked sideways at a joint they'd nail me to an upside-down cross.

Someone calling themselves Sonny Schlong had started a thread about Dad's kidnapping, where speculation ranged from wildly deranged to merely ridiculous. But an avatar of a smoking gun adjusted the record until it sat more or less straight. Dad had been escorted unhappily from his Portland, Oregon home by two men. And so far, the gun said, no demands had been made.

I signed up immediately for an account, selecting a preset avatar of

the goddess Athena, and called myself FarFarAwayGirl, because why not? Then I shot the smoking gun (username: BangBang) a private message, thanking him or her for being the voice of reason. BangBang lobbed a reply while I was perusing old threads, hunting for a Greek mafia pecking order. I discovered that Greece was packed with crime lords and criminal organizations, not all of them Greek mafia. The Bulgarians and Russians had their own mafia presence in the country, along with rumors of up-and-coming Serbian cartels. That was without touching on Greece's Romani population and their low-level racketeering.

Nobody ever stuck all that on a postcard.

Just calling it as I see it, BangBang wrote. *These are people who think the moon landing was fake. They can get carried away*.

OMG, I typed. *The moon landing was real*?

There was a long pause, then he or she threw me a winky face. *You seem interested in facts. What's your story*?

You tell me your story, I'll tell you mine.

I'm nobody, BangBang wrote. *Just a nobody who's been around, seen a thing or two.*

I'll remember that.

Don't remember it too hard if anyone asks.

No winky face.

Outside, the goat was chewing on my grandmother's roses. The chomp-chomp of molars grinding was unmistakable. I unhooked the shutters, flung them wide, poked my head out. Sure enough, the roses were death-spiraling.

"Hey, I'm trying to save your life here. Help me help you. Start with not eating the plants, okay?"

The goat kept on chewing.

Gah! I had no authority here, even as the granddaughter of one of the country's most feared—according to the Crooked Noses Message Board—women.

The night was inching up to its midpoint. Sleep wasn't happening. Back home it was mid-afternoon and my body was gearing up for happy hour. Never mind that I rarely *went* to a real happy hour; my own personal happy hour took place a little later, with chips and whatever I was currently glomming on Netflix.

I snatched up one of my grandmother's *koulouraki*, pitched it out the window. The goat quit chewing roses long enough to snarf down the cookie, then returned to its original plan.

Then came the footsteps.

Heavy things, each one laid down with precision. My Spidey sense went haywire, despite the flaw in logic. This place was a compound. Lots of guards. And this house was the heavily fortified heart, or so Grandma had said. Unauthorized feet had no business getting this close, and these feet sounded like they hadn't stopped for a little name tag at the front gates.

The goat skittered away. That was all the confirmation I needed to do the same.

I jerked the shutters back into their frame, slapped the hook into place, shoved the bolts into their holes. On the other side of the blue wood slats someone was breathing, a thick, deliberate sound. My back flattened against the wall to the left of the shutters, and my breathing temporarily quit so I could hear over the sound of my protesting heart. It knew I was screwed and wanted to evacuate, whether the rest of me was willing or not. My legs were on my heart's team, but my brain was too busy running in circles like a decapitated chicken to shoot them any signals.

A mocking laugh wafted between the slats. I squeezed my eyes tight and wished for a grenade launcher, but my fairy godmother was busy making princesses out of pumpkins, and God—if there was one—was doing His eye-for-an-eye party trick in someone else's yard.

"Katerina … I forgot to give you a number. You want a number, don't you?"

I'd heard that voice before, earlier today, during a nightmare of sorts. Words scraped over shattered glass. The Baptist.

My insides liquified. I suddenly had the solidity of water in a thin balloon.

"Help," I whispered.

"Shh …" Like he was mollifying a kitten. "There's no help coming this time. You're safe in your *yiayia*'s house where nothing can hurt you except the Baptist."

To date, there had been very little reason to be genuinely frightened in my life—at least of strangers. When you've lost your mother to cancer, and spent sleepless nights freaking out that you might lose your father too, stranger danger doesn't seem so scary.

Aside from the losing Dad thing, my only other rational fears—as opposed to my minor phobias, listed earlier—had been limited to opening mail from the Internal Revenue Service and standing in line at the Post Office in mid-December. Violent crime wasn't on my radar. Murder, rape, carjackings: they were things that happened outside my bubble. Portland wasn't exactly Baltimore.

But right now, the hot churn in my gut and the ice cream in my veins had put their heads together, and they were telling me I was scared close to shitless, but not quite all the way there. Which was a

plus, because the outhouse was, well, outside with the psychopath.

"I've got to give you a number, Katerina," he said in his slow, methodical way. "It's how I do business. Are you ready? Remember your number when I tell it to you. Five-oh-three. Do you like that number? It's my new favorite number." There was a short, pregnant pause—about the length of a mayfly's gestation period. "I'll be back, Five-oh-three. Got business with Five-oh-two." Crazy laugh. The kind a psychotic clown makes. Very Tim Curry in the sewer, laughing about how they all float down there.

I hugged the wall.

Chapter 8

WHICH IS how my grandmother found me in the morning.

"Are you a vampire?"

I shook my head. Maybe I kind of whimpered, too.

"Is that American jazzercise?"

"No," I squeaked.

She had her hair up in curlers and a thin black robe loosely belted, not a bra in sight, proving that one could potentially fling them over their shoulder like a continental soldier. She was a glimpse into my future, and the future was hardcore droopy.

"Then what are you doing on the wall?"

I looked down. It was a miracle I wasn't standing in a puddle.

"The Baptist was here."

The curlers shook; the boobs, too. "Nobody can come into the compound, Katerina, my love. You had a bad dream."

"Nuh-uh. It wasn't a dream."

I peeled myself off the wall, unhooked the shutters and threw them wide. The goat was back, feasting on the thorny corpses of Grandma's rosebushes. What I expected was a footprint, a business card, something to prove I wasn't a nutpie. But there was nothing except the goat, which was on a whole other level of bonkers.

"He was there, I swear. I'm not crazy. Also, the cute goat ate your roses."

"Ha," Grandma said. "Then the joke is on him because soon we will be eating goat."

My mouth dropped open. "You're going to EAT the goat?"

"What for do we want to keep him? You cannot milk a boy goat. You can try, but that would make him very happy, and he would never forget the happiness after that."

"I'm not eating the goat. It's adorable. I don't eat adorable things I know personally."

She shrugged. Her bosom heaved itself all over the room. "Then you will be very hungry that day." She nodded to my feet. "And put some shoes on, my love. Otherwise people will think you have no money."

"I kind of don't have much."

"If you are poor, you must pretend to be rich. If you are rich … it is better to pretend you are poor." Then she shut the door, leaving me alone.

I stuck my head out the window. "Hey. What she said, forget about it. Nobody's slapping you on a sandwich."

"We are Greek." Grandma's voice floated through the door. "We do not eat sandwiches. We have *souvlaki*."

"Trust me," I whispered to the goat. "No *souvlaki*."

Breakfast was me, Aunt Rita, and for some inexplicable reason, Xander. Aunt Rita was playing *L.A. Confidential*'s version of Kim Basinger, in a long, waist-nipping pale mauve robe paired with a bright slash of red lipstick. Grandma was a bucket of coal. Xander was dressed for lounging at a beachside bar. If he was headed for Hawaii anytime soon, at least he had the shirt.

"From this moment, Xander is going to be your bodyguard," Grandma said, flipping fried eggs onto plates. Somewhere between the shell and the skillet, the poor things had drowned in olive oil. "Wherever you go, he goes, too."

"I don't need a bodyguard." The words trotted off my tongue on autopilot. I knew I kind of, sort of, maybe needed one after the whole The-Baptist-outside-my bedroom thing, but I wasn't about to admit it —not with Xander sitting here across the table at me. The man looked good—too good—even with a faint smirk and a Hawaiian shirt. I wondered what he'd look like wearing just the smirk.

Mentally, I punched myself in the ovaries to make the visual vanish.

"Oh," Grandma said. "I am so glad you are giving me an answer when I did not ask a question."

I tilted my head. "Was that Greek sarcasm?"

"Greeks invented sarcasm," she told me.

Aunt Rita took a swig of juice before commenting. "Mama told us you had a dream about the Baptist."

"If I say it was a dream do I still have to have a bodyguard?"

"Yes," Grandma said.

So much for that.

"Wasn't a dream," I said, pushing aside the oil in search of eggs. "He was outside my window."

"Dream," Grandma said in a knowing tone.

I gave her a sharp, pointy look. "Not a dream. He said he came to give me a number."

The spatula screeched across the skillet, before skittering out of her hand. "What! Why did you not say?"

My aunt crossed herself frantically. "My Virgin Mary! If he gave you a number you are already dead."

"If I'm dead, how do I know these eggs are way too greasy?"

Aunt Rita glanced at my plate. "They look fine to me."

My grandmother grabbed me by the shoulders. "What number did he give you?"

"Five-oh-three. He said he'd be back after he was done with five-oh-two. Who's five-oh-two?"

"Who knows?" Her expression turned to steel. "Bodyguard or no bodyguard, you are not to leave the property. Xander, she goes nowhere."

Xander nodded, the wretched brown-noser.

I shook my head. "No way. I have to find my father—your son."

"We will find him," she said.

Maybe the bodyguard wasn't such a bad idea. If the Baptist came looking for me after he'd finished off unlucky five-oh-two, at the very least Xander would be a diversion, maybe giving me enough to run and hide.

What I really needed was a gun. I *so* needed my own gun. No way was I going to rely on Xander to shoot straight. He'd missed the Baptist last time.

"Can I please have a gun?"

"No," Grandma said.

"If you don't give me a gun, I'll buy one."

With no clue about the logistics of purchasing a firearm in Greece, I was already psyching myself up for the possibility of being forced to buy a gun from someone with a lengthy rap sheet. Maybe Baby Dimitri would know where I could find one. He looked like a guy with a trunkful of guns, serial numbers buffed to smooth metal.

"You cannot just buy a gun in Greece," Grandma told me. "They do extensive background checks and every gun is registered. This is not America."

"Crete is different," Aunt Rita said.

Grandma nodded. "Crete is Crete."

"But once they check you out here," my aunt said, "you can open carry."

I rescued a piece of egg and chewed. "I need protection, and I don't mean condoms. The guy was here in this allegedly impenetrable fortress."

I hadn't needed the other kind of protection in a while. We're talking serious dry spell here. At this point, I fully expected my woman parts to pack up and leave for someplace where the getting was good and frequent. Probably Mykonos. Everybody got lucky in Mykonos.

"No condoms and no gun," Grandma said, snatching up the spatula. "No sex unless you are married. Nobody in this family has sex until

they are married, unless they are a man. It is different for men."

I did, Aunt Rita mouthed, behind her mother's back. I was pretty sure she didn't count, seeing as she was a man before she was a woman. And I wasn't about to deliver the bad news that my virginity had been lost thanks to a game of Go Fish.

"Fine. What about something non-lethal? Pepper spray? How about a Taser?"

"I love Tasers," my aunt said. "*Pew pew*. It's too funny watching them flop around like fish."

I grabbed the table's edge, leaning forward eagerly. "I've never seen it in person, only on YouTube."

"It's fun," she said, as if we were sharing a girlish conspiracy. "I will show you later on one of the cousins. Probably Takis."

"Cool."

"YouTube." Grandma cracked four more eggs into the skillet, where they began to swim for their lives. "Nothing but the pornography."

Pretty sure she had her websites mixed up. I reached for the toast, saved the egg by scooping it onto the bread. "Well, Baptist or no Baptist, I want to see more of Greece than Grandma's house. What do you say, Xander? Beach?"

He kept right on eating, ignoring me.

"Come on, Mama. Let the girl go for a swim. Xander will protect her." Aunt Rita wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. "And the beach is full of witnesses."

Witnesses. That didn't sound reassuring. Surely she meant sunbathers, but whatever. I wanted to go to the beach … and from there, to the next name on my list. But what to do about the bodyguard? He was guarding *my* body, but his orders all came down from the grandmothership, which was a problem.

Think, Kat. Think.

"Fine," Grandma said. "Go to the beach, but do not come crying to me when you are dead. Xander—" She pointed the spatula at him. "Be careful."

Did he look worried? Nope. He kept on eating. The guy was a walking, eating ice cube. Unless somebody messed with the music in his car.

"It would be better if I had a gun. Just in case."

Grandma sighed like I was busting her chops. "Xander, take Katerina to the armory. Give her Michail's old piece."

Score!

No bikini. No beach clothes. And I was down to my last clean T-shirt.

"I have to go shopping after we get my gun," I told Xander. My grandmother had moved him into the third bedroom, wedged between her room and mine. I'd previously mistaken the room for a cupboard. Harry Potter's room under the stairs was a palace compared to this space. Under different circumstances I'd offer to swap rooms with the guy, but I hadn't forgotten that he'd handcuffed me to his car.

He gave me one of those looks that said he'd rather face a firing squad.

"Fine. Since we're going to the beach, I'll just go topless."

His mouth was silent but his face said that wasn't an option.

Obviously the physical attraction was one-sided, which was fine with me. I'm not picky about what a guy does for a living, but even I had standards. And I'd drawn a squiggly line at 'henchman'.

Wherever we were going first it was on the compound's grounds, into what I thought was a greenhouse or conservatory. It *was* a conservatory—but not *merely* a conservatory, as it turned out. All the usual suspects were inside: plants mostly, and comfortable outdoor furniture twisted into elegant shapes. The air was thick and soupy. It wanted me to choke and die on its dampness.

Xander lifted a tiger-striped orchid and retrieved a key dangling from a green ribbon. Then he rolled aside what I thought was an ornamental boulder, revealing a metal trapdoor that was masquerading as a square drain.

Through the glass I saw Grandma disappearing through the arch, accompanied by Takis, Stavros, and Aunt Rita. They were dressed for a funeral. George Kefalas's funeral. It had to be. And they'd left me behind, the rats.

Xander stuck the key in the lock, twisted, and lifted the door. Down we went—ladies before gentlemen.

I've never seen an armory offscreen. What I expected was a large, bright space, walls plastered with steel shelves and stands to hold foreboding, yet impressive, firearms and artillery. What I got was the equivalent of a root cellar, with thin helpless light, doing its best to escape from the single yellowing bulb dangling from the ceiling's center. The shelves were ancient wood, the floor dirt. Stacked along one wall were crates stamped with Cyrillic letters. Russian maybe. Definitely Slavic of some flavor.

"This is it?"

Xander shrugged.

"What's in the crates?" They were nailed shut, so I couldn't sneak a peek.

This time he ignored me. He pulled a box from one of the shelves. Flipped the lid. Dumped a Y shaped stick in my hand. The stick had a strip of red rubber wound around each arm, and a leather pocket to hold a projectile.

It was a Biblical moment, until I remembered David had felled Goliath with a sling, not a slingshot. I stared at it for several seconds, then took a long hard look at the low ceiling, in case I was on one of those hidden camera shows.

Alas, no camera. This was real life—my very real life.

"A slingshot," I said, disbelieving. "You want me to protect myself with a slingshot?"

That won me another shrug.

The toys my parents chose for me came with guarantees of safety, provided I was within the proper age range. They'd never let me run with knives, and my scissors came with a rounded tip and a plastic guard until I was in my teens. A slingshot was definitely not on the approved list. Now I find out my father had been the pot telling the kettle none of the other kitchenware was allowed be black.

Which was weird, now that I thought about it. You'd think Dad would have gone Spartan and prepared me for war.

"Ammo?"

He looked at me. Then he crouched down, scooped up a handful of dirt and stones, sprinkled it in my hand. The wiseguy was a wiseass.

But not bright.

The second he turned away, I loaded the slingshot, pulled back on the rubber band, aimed it at his butt.

Alakazam! By the Power of Numbskull!

Splat.

Xander spun around, snatched the toy out of my hand, shoved it into my back pocket.

"Good thing you didn't give me a gun."

We went in yesterday's car. I rode in the backseat—no cuffs this time. Lucky me. The beach was fifteen minutes or so away, but Xander cut to a different road, one leading into Volos itself. The port city had a long strip of waterfront land, but no beach. The whole thing was rocks and cement. Perfect for a harbor, not so much for swimming. For that we'd have to hike east to Agria, which was the first of a chain of villages that stretched all the way around the peninsula.

Incidentally, Agria was where the Kefalas Olives factory was located.

Obviously Xander had something else in mind besides swimming.

Pointless asking. I'd never get an answer.

We—well, Xander, since he was in control of the steering and the gas pedal—stopped outside a row of shops. A mishmash of storefronts on a busy street, where traffic moved at the speed of whiplash. Dad used to joke that street signs in Greece were serving suggestions, more for tourists than locals. Mom and I would laugh it off, chalk it up to being another one of his tall Greek tales. Now I was seeing that all the stories he used to tell were pure non-fiction. Too bad they were turning out to be mostly true crime stories.

The storefronts were grimy, covered in a thick layer of the city's main byproduct: smut. The signs all employed the same blocky typography in colors that didn't just clash with the rest of the color scheme, they went to full-on war.

My silent bodyguard grabbed the point of my elbow, steering me toward the store with bikini-clad sheets of cardboard crowded together in the window display. Not a headless mannequin in sight.

A bell let the cat out of the bag about our arrival in the dimly lit shop. Not that I was shooting for stealth, but Greek salespeople were an unknown quantity at this point. Would they leave me to shop in peace, or hover by my elbow like judgmental ghosts with verbal diarrhea?

Dust motes drifted through the air, tiny jellyfish searching for sinuses to invade. The interior was marginally cleaner than its exterior, but the stock looked nice enough. Not one to straddle the sharp, bleeding edge of fashion, I knew enough to know the styles were current and I probably couldn't go too wrong with many of the swimsuits.

The salesgirl lifted her head from her cell phone. I smiled and waved, but her face didn't budge. It was stuck in the *whatever* position. Perfect. Behind her, a black curtain spanned the width of a doorway.

Xander snatched up a one-piece designed to cover the essentials, the non-essentials, and my ankles.

"Seriously—no." I plucked it out of his hands, stuck it back on its hook. "Not unless we time travel to back to 1914—and maybe not even then."

The salesgirl snorted.

I zeroed in on something considered modest by Brazilian standards, and mildly risqué on American beaches. Two red triangles held together with thin strings and two larger triangles that tied at the sides. I waved them in the air.

"Can I try these on?"

"No changing room," Miss Congeniality told me.

"How about if I try it on over my clothes?"

"Sure," she said. "You could do that."

I shimmied into the bottoms, tied the top, inspected myself from every angle in a mirror better suited to a carnival. I couldn't gauge if my ass was that big or if my head was really that small.

"What do you think?" I asked Xander. He held up the suit I'd discarded for violating time travel laws and raised an eyebrow.

What was with this guy?

I stepped out of the red bottoms, yanked off the red top, carried them up to the counter. Before I had a chance to whip out my credit card, dealing it a fatal blow, Xander dropped a sleek, black metal card into my hand. Nothing on it except numbers and a magnetic strip.

I might have drooled a little. And I wasn't the only one. Miss Congeniality put the phone down slowly, eyes on the card.

"Tell me you're not wearing that to the beach," she said, scoping out my jeans and T-shirt with a critical eye.

"That was kind of the plan."

"You'll look like a tourist."

"I think I am," I said, trying to look less lame than I felt.

"Give me ten minutes and your boyfriend's credit card and you'll look like you belong." She eyed my complete lack of a tan. "More or less."

"Not my boyfriend," I muttered.

"Who cares? He's standing here with a black credit card."

"Is it your money?" I asked him.

He jerk his head up once. No.

"Grandma's?"

A nod.

Spending Xander's money was a no-go, but Grandma's? A whole different fairy tale.

"Okay," I said to the salesgirl. "Do your worst."

She grabbed my hand, snatched up the card, pulled me through the curtain behind her. What I expected was a storeroom. What I got was slightly smaller than a warehouse. You name it—if it was clothing, it was in this room. Everything was designer-labelled, and way out of my price range, but not Grandma's, judging from the way Xander found a wall to lean on so he could fiddle with his phone.

"I can't afford too much," I said. "I have to pay it back. And I lost my job because of a fire."

"Don't worry. Most of it's cheap."

I squinted at a rack of Chanel suits. "Really?"

"Of course," she assured me. "Everything falls off the back of a truck, and my boss is the guy who's there to pick it up when it does."

"Enterprising," I said.

"Isn't it?" She chewed her bottom lip for a moment, gaze scanning the racks and shelves and the hundreds of boxes stacked high. "What

are you, size thirty-six?"

I gulped. "That sounds …" Tent-sized. "… big."

"European sizing. What size are you in America?"

"Hard to say. It changes from store to store. We have vanity sizing."

"We don't do that," she said. "If you're fat in Europe the numbers won't lie to you." She disappeared between the racks, and when she returned she'd transformed into my fairy godmother.

Waves had no power in the Pagasetic Gulf. The beaches were pebbles and the tide rose and fell, but the water licked the shore with an untrusting tongue, not sure if it liked the flavor or not. Swimmers hauled themselves aboard moored vessels they didn't own. Seaweed stuck itself to limbs, shooting unsuspecting swimmers out of the water, screaming about sea monsters.

I peeled off one of my new sundresses, then flopped down on the beach mat I'd just unrolled. Xander shunned the offer of a towel or the edge of my mat, choosing to park his butt on the pebbles. I figured it was his funeral; a more adventurous eater than me could fry an egg on those things. His phone was in his hand, but his attention was everywhere else. Slipping away wasn't going to be easy, but I'd give it my Yankee best. It was no coincidence that I'd deposited us in amidst a smallish sea of similar red bikinis. Safety—and invisibility—in numbers.

As the sun sneered overhead, I kicked part one of my plan into action.

"Wow," I said, looking longingly at an ice cream walking past. "I can't remember the last time I had ice cream. It sure looks good."

Xander's sunglass lenses were pitch black, not a flicker behind them. All I could see was a miniature me reflected in their shine. Red bikini. White skin. Basically, I was Canada's flag.

Ice creams and drinks were marching double-time from a pavilion set into the sidewalk. Besides the obvious refreshments, it sold magazines, newspapers, cigarettes, and gum. The line was thirty bodies long.

"Want one? Because I want one—maybe even two."

No change. I moved to stand but he pulled me back down.

"One of us has to go," I said. "And there are only two of us here. We're surrounded by people, how dangerous can it be? Nobody is going to abduct, kill, or maim me on a crowded beach. It never happens. Or almost never." I wasn't sure. But I was pretty convinced it wouldn't be happening to me, because I was leaving the second his back was turned and his front was busy buying ice cream.

He gave me a pained look and stood.

"Something with a cone," I said. "Preferably chocolate with the hard chocolatey shell. Please."

He began working his way across the beach, glancing back occasionally, until he realized looking back led to trampling on other sunbathers. I waited until he was in line and hidden behind the racks of magazines and papers. In a flash, I pulled a different dress out of my new beach bag and shimmied into it, tags and all.

Then I hoofed it across the pebbles, away from where Xander was waiting on ice cream.

Bad idea? Probably. But I've had worse.

There was always yesterday.

Christos Koulouris—also known as Cookie, on account of how his last name was derived from *koulouri*, a snack somewhere between a cookie and a pretzel—lived in a grand house set back about a quarter mile from the road. Zoning didn't seem to be a thing in this village, so his neighbors were a church and a dump of a house that was losing a war with the elements. Who could blame it? The sun was bad tempered around here. That had to get old after fifty or so years. My body was already thinking shedding its skin and melting into a greasy puddle on the uneven sidewalk was a decent coping strategy, in this weather. Cookie might have been one of the Family's biggest adversaries, but unlike Grandma he wasn't tucked inside a fortress. No gate, no guards, no guard dogs, no security cameras that I could see. He did have a fountain, though. Very nice. Its centerpiece was a marble dude springing a leak in the water. The driveway was wide and paved with bricks. The house itself was three stories of pale cream paint on stucco, topped with a red slate roof.

A woman answered the door. She was in her early sixties, but had trudged a long, hard road getting there. She wore a black blouse tucked into a black skirt, both straining at the seams. Her sandals were black, flat, and framed yellowing, toenails. Behind her, the house was bright and clean. The air smelled of lemons formulated in a factory and pine that had sprouted in a test tube.

I wished her a good morning, gave her my first name, and asked for the man who was second on my family's list of enemies.

Her passive face hardened. "I suppose you are one of his *putanas*. What do you want—money?"

Confusion set in. "No. I have a job. Or at least I did." Until Grandma blew my workplace sky high.

She rolled her eyes. "That is new, a whore with a job.

Congratulations."

"Wait—I'm not a whore! I never even met your—"

"Brother," she said. "Christos was my brother, and now he is dead."

"That's been happening a lot lately," I said, thinking about Kefalas.

"This happened yesterday."

Just like Kefalas.

I gave her my heartfelt apologies, but she shrugged them off.

"It was his own fault," she said. "When you lie down with shit, you will be covered with shit when you stand up again—guaranteed."

Oookay … "What kind of shit?"

She shrugged, fixating on a point somewhere beyond my left ear. "Drugs, whores, guns, gambling. My brother never made one honest euro or drachma in his life. Even as a boy he was a criminal. He was a pimp when he was in high school. Who does that? Shit, that is who."

"I'm sorry your brother was shit."

She reached out, slapped my head. "Show some respect. He was my baby brother. I don't know how I will go on without him." She dabbed at Sahara-dry eyes.

"How did he die?"

"He drowned."

My knees went wobbly, my face cold. That was too the Baptist-like for me. "Drowned where?"

"In the toilet, can you believe it? Who does that? He was a successful businessman—a criminal, yes, but crime is still a business—and now he will be known as the man who drowned in a toilet. Oh well, at least he did it at his apartment in Volos and not here."

"So it was a murder?"

"What else would it be? My brother would not kill himself. Suicide is for other people."

"Do the police have any suspects?" Listen to me, all private eye and stuff. If I wasn't sweat-soaked and dehydrating, I'd be pretty cool right now.

She snorted. "It will be like hunting for a single grain of rice in Asia." She squinted at me, as though it suddenly dawned on her that my being there was weird. "Who are you? And why are you asking all these questions?"

I shook my head. "No reason. I don't suppose your brother kidnapped anyone recently, like, say, from America?" I pulled my phone out of my pocket, scrolled to a selfie Dad and I snapped the last time we ate out. "Does he look familiar?"

"Kidnapped! What are you talking about? Why would my brother kidnap anyone?" She squinted at the picture. "Him I never saw in my life. Who is he?"

"My father."

She gasped. "You are one of those Makris?"

Hang on a minute … "Wait. How—" She'd obviously recognized Dad, the rotten liar.

She slammed the door. "Go away."

"Please, I need your help."

Nothing.

I stood there for a moment on the front porch, hand shading my eyes, and thought about taking a quick swim in the fountain.

Behind me, there was a small click. The door had opened enough for Cookie's sister to fling a handful of sprinkles at me. I touched my finger to one of the white grains on my arm and tasted. Salt. She'd hit me with a Greek superstition. Want a guest to leave? Why ask them to go when you can hurl salt? Crazy.

I tossed a few grains over my shoulder, in case the devil was hanging around, with nothing better to do with his time. Then I trotted back down the long driveway, trying to figure out my next move. The sister had mentioned an apartment in Volos. How the heck was I going to find that? Getting directions was as easy as pie in the smaller villages where everybody was used to minding their neighbors' business. But in the city?

I'd need a miracle.

Or—incoming thunderbolt!— an internet connection. Good thing I had one on my phone.

A quick glance at my phone showed it was closing in on lunchtime. Before long, Greece would be shutting down for the afternoon. People would take to the shade, either in their beds or coffee shops, where the seating was all outdoors but every table had a broad umbrella.

I tramped back to the promenade. Buses allegedly slouched past every fifteen minutes, all of them Volos-bound. My plan was to be on the next one that rolled to a stop outside this produce store.

Was Xander going crazy looking for me?

And did I really care?

Let's take those two questions one at a time.

Most certainly. And nope.

Okay, maybe a bit.

That I was on a psychopath's hit list aside, I wasn't a kid in need of a sitter. A bodyguard was fine, and I would have welcomed that, but Xander—at the behest of my grandmother—was trying to dictate my every move. Not cool. Having to do this the underhanded way stunk; I hated to be all emo teenager and bratty about it, but the two of them had left me no choice.

I bought a *Sokofreta* bar at a *periptero*—one of the postage stamp-sized square pavilions (a smaller cousin of the beachside pavilion where I'd ditched Xander) that dotted Greece and sold cigarettes,

candy, magazines, newspapers, fizzy drinks, and ice cream—snarfing down the sweet cardboard wafer while I watched Greece slowly grind to a four-hour halt. Women hurried home with their groceries stuffed into nylon mesh bags. Greeks fled the beach, leaving the red and white bodies to crisp under the boiler. Mine would be one of them if I wasn't careful. I had the usual Greek dosage of melanin in my skin, but Portland was more Easy Bake Oven than blast furnace, so I was only a shade or two darker than milk.

The bus came. Several old ladies elbowed me in the gut, because boarding a Greek bus was pretty much Thunderdome. If I'd tried to assert myself they'd have shivved me, so I let it go. When it was my turn to board the back of the bus—as was customary—I dropped my coins in the conductor's hand, then hurried to the nearest vacant seat before his glare could turn me to stone.

I don't know what I expected. Something fancy, I guess. Organized crime seemed like it paid big if you were any good at it. But Cookie's apartment was in a building this close to being condemned—if that was even a thing here. Five stories. Safety glass windows. The kind with wire running through them; usually reserved for shower stalls. Flaking stucco. And was it my imagination or did the building have a minor lean?

Something told me it wasn't destined for *Torre di Pisa* fame.

And it had one great honking, massive, ginormous downside: Detective Melas was standing on the front doorstep, arms folded, wearing jeans and a black T-shirt that showed what he was made of—bricks, mostly. A grin had made itself comfortable on his face.

"You alone?" he asked.

I held out my arms like I was making a presentation. "No, I brought all your friends with me."

He threw back his head, laugh roaring out. The rich, masculine sound did things to my body I didn't want it to do. Then he got serious—fast.

"What are you doing here?"

"Visiting."

"No, you're not."

"If you've got all the answers, why ask me?"

"I'm a sociable guy and you're cute."

Flattery wouldn't get him anywhere.

Okay, maybe it would under different circumstances. But not until we'd been on a few dates. Or one with lots of drinks.

I grabbed his shoulders, tried rolling him aside like a boulder, but

there was more of him than there was of me—and the more was all muscle.

"Forget it," he said. "You're not going up there."

"Why not?"

"Because you won't find any answers."

"I'm not looking for answers, just clues."

"The man's dead."

"Drowned in a toilet, I know. His sister told me."

"Jesus," he said, looking a mixture of horrified and impressed. "You walked right up to his front door?"

I shrugged. "What else was I going to do? Bribe one of the servants and sneak in the back?" Maybe next time. "So how are we getting in? A special police lockpick?"

He dangled a rabbit's foot in front of my nose. Swinging from the loop was a silvery key. "Baby, I've got skills."

I inspected the key. "Stolen?"

"No. I'm a cop."

"Translation: you made baseless threats to the property owner?"

"Come on," he said. "If I can't persuade you to leave, it's safer if you're with me. At least I can keep an eye on you." He looked past me at the mostly bare street. "What happened to your bodyguard?"

"You know about that?"

"I'm a cop."

"I lost him on the beach in Agria when he went to get ice cream. Oops."

"Bikini or one-piece?" he said, eyeing my chest appreciatively.

I rolled my eyes, pushed past him to tug the lobby door open.

His finger hooked the back of my dress. "What's that in your pocket?"

"What does it look like?"

"A slingshot."

"Good news, your vision is excellent."

"A slingshot? Really?"

"That's what I said. But Grandma wouldn't give me a gun."

"Smart woman."

"How smart can she be? She lets Takis and Stavros carry guns."

"True."

The lobby floor was cleanish. The walls were covered in urban art and poetry—some of it English. There I learned somebody wanted to *Fack the Virgin Mary*, *Fack* my mother and, *Fack* me. Or, as they put it, *Fack U*. I couldn't speak for the other two women (death is hell on the libido, or so I hear), but I decided to pass. Wasn't an easy decision, but it had to be done for the good of mankind.

Two ways up. Stairs or elevator. The stairwell had exactly one

light, a single fluorescent tube five stories away. By the time the light reached the bottom it was too exhausted to shine. Which left the narrow box attached to cables of dubious quality, maintained, no doubt, by the same party responsible for the lightbulb.

Detective Melas read my mind. "Stairs?"

"I'll follow you."

That way the rats would get him first.

Cookie's apartment was on the top floor. We're not talking penthouse material here. Newspaper tumbleweeds blew past, powered by a breeze from an invisible source. Fast food litter hunkered along the hallway's edges. He had a crappy blue door, same as every other door we passed, same as his three neighbors on the fifth floor. The paint was cracked and peeling, the number tarnished, and the frame looked like it could be easily persuaded to step aside for anyone with a persistent enough knock.

Not necessary. We had keys. That didn't stop Melas from knocking and waiting.

"Dead men don't open doors," I said.

"Except when they do."

I let my eyebrow ask the question.

"You see the body?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Me either. I know the guys who gave him a ride to the morgue, and they said he was dead enough. But he has a reputation."

"For what?"

"Playing dead."

"You think he faked his death?"

"Wouldn't be the first time."

On the outside, Cookie's apartment was a dive. On the inside, it was functional and tidy. Two cramped bedrooms. A kitchen meant for someone who either microwaved their meals or ate out a lot. Cheap furniture. Ghastly couch with ancient stains of unknown origins. Big TV on a flimsy stand. The place was clean enough, but apart from the television the place was in its twilight years—on a fixed income.

"What are we looking for?" I asked.

"Anything."

Melas vanished into one of the bedrooms. I took the bathroom. When we met again, it was in the living room.

What kind of guy faked death not once, but multiple times?

I didn't realize I'd asked it out loud until Melas clued me in.

"Word on the street is there's a price on his head."

"Don't guys in organized crime always have prices on their heads?"

He was flipping through a short stack of mail, most of it junk. "You would think. But every one of the crime families has their niche. Most

of the time, aside from minor skirmishes, the machine moves smoothly. But this kidnapping has thrown things into air. Your father's not just anybody. He's a Makris—and Baboulas's son. You may not think your grandmother is doing nothing to find him, but she is. Guaranteed. Word is she hired the Baptist to find him and take out the trash."

"The Baptist?" I felt woozy.

He shrugged.

"No way." I leaned against the wall, not wanting to sit on the couch. It looked like it could tell horror stories. "She was furious when he found out he was at the house in the middle of the night. There's no way she'd hire him. And besides, she has her own henchmen. What do they do if they don't kill people when she wants them to?"

"Wait—the Baptist was at the house last night?"

I nodded.

"You saw him?"

I shook my head. "He was outside my room. Said he wanted to give me a number."

"What number?"

"Five-oh-three."

"Jesus," he said. "They say he's killed five hundred people."

"Five hundred and two. He said he was on his way to take care of five-oh-two last night."

Our heads turned on their stalks in the same moment, toward the bathroom.

"Wait," I said. "Cookie's sister said he died yesterday. the Baptist was outside my window around two in the morning."

He mulled that over for a moment. "Did you find anything useful in the bathroom?" Oh, he of little faith, he delivered the line as he was going to investigate for himself.

"*Serviettas*," I said. Maxi pads. "But it doesn't look like a woman's been here, like, ever." If a woman had been here she lacked the homemaking gene.

"Not that weird." He pulled the shower curtain aside, peered in, pulled it back across. "They're good for mopping up blood."

"Why would a man be mopping—" My engine light came on. "Oh. Bullet wounds."

"Shooting. Stabbings. You name it. Come on," he said, giving the place a final visual wipe-down. "He won't come back here if he's still alive—not until he wants to be found."

"Where are you going?"

"To put eyes on the dead guy myself. Make sure the body matches the mugshot."

He unclipped his phone, stabbed it a few times with his finger.

Clipped it back on his belt. "You may as well go back to your grandmother's. Dead or alive, Cookie doesn't have anything to do with your father's disappearance."

"It's not that I don't trust your word, it's that I don't know you."

"Then trust this," he said. "Christos Koulouris and your father were best friends, right up until the day your father jumped ship to America."

He shooed me out, locked the door behind us. We began a slow jog down the stairs.

"His best friend? I thought they were on opposing teams."

"Now. But when they were kids they were close."

"How do you know?"

He opened the exterior door. "Everybody knows."

I didn't know. Although, now I suppose I did. And I was thirsty for more details, but rolling into the street was Xander, window down, shitty folk music blaring. He pulled up alongside us, gave me a look that said I'd better get in or he'd get me in.

I ran.

Or I tried. The hand gripping my dress had turned me into a refugee from a cartoon, a coyote or cat treading air. When Melas plopped me down I stabbed his chest with slightly less than three inches of finger, topped with a chewed nail.

"You turned me in? You're an ass!"

"I am the law," he said, deadpan.

"You stink!"

Chapter 9

I PLANNED to run away again. But first, lunch.

"So, anyone get a ransom note yet?" I asked.

Lunch was on the kitchen table, and it looked like bowls of steaming sea monsters.

"Nobody sends ransom notes anymore," Grandma said. "It is a dying art."

"What do they do?"

Her mouth pursed. "Text messages and phone calls from disposable mobile phones."

"Those animals," I said.

"Nobody takes any pride in their work these days. A well-crafted ransom note is a thing of beauty. You do not just put any old words on the page. In the old days if you wanted to get fancy, you could cut letters out of a newspaper or magazine, or have somebody do calligraphy."

Aunt Rita raised her hand. "I used to do the calligraphy for our ransom notes."

"Wow, cool."

No, not cool. Why did I just say that? My family was the freakin' mob. What's cool about that? Nothing, that's what. Yet there I was, bobbing my head like a doofus.

For the record, let it be known that I was slightly disgusted with myself.

She preened. "The monks taught me."

My handwriting was round and girlish. It had refused to grow up along with the rest of me.

I gave her what felt like a confused look. "Monks run schools? I thought that was nuns."

"In Greece we have nun and monk schools."

"American monks make fruitcake and fudge. At least they do in Kentucky."

"Monks making fruitcake," Grandma said. "What is next?"

With the fork, I poked at the sea monsters in my bowl. Surprisingly, they didn't bite. "I don't know what this is and I'm not sure I want to know."

"Stewed okra," Aunt Rita said. "How was the beach?"

Huh. That was surprising. I figured Xander would report straight back to Grandma that I'd cut myself lose as soon as possible. Maybe he

was on my side after all. I poked around in the stew with my fork, picking out bits I could identify. (Look, tomato!) No, the more likely scenario was that he didn't want to lose his head.

"Hot and pebbly."

Aunt Rita leaked a sigh. "I love sunbathing. When I was a boy I lived at the beach." My aunt had skin like an expensive handbag, so I believed her.

Grandma abandoned her food. She went to cut bread we didn't need. There was already a small mountain in the middle of the table.

"Probably it's good you did that when you were a boy," I said. "Fewer tan lines"

"Fewer tan lines," she said at the same time, then gasped. "Touch red!"

I didn't know why I was diving across the kitchen for the fruit bowl on the counter. I guess I was just going with the flow.

"Why are we touching red?"

"We said the same thing at the same time," my aunt said. "It's bad luck. It means we'll fight."

I looked from the apple in my hand to the red g-string in hers. "We're good now—right?"

"We're safe. This time."

"My Virgin Mary," Grandma muttered.

"So if there's no ransom note, how's the Dad hunt going?" I asked, dropping the apple back into the fruit bowl and resuming my avoidance of lunch. "Any clues at all?"

"Not yet," Grandma said.

"Nothing from Interpol, the FBI, the Hellenic Police?"

"No."

"Okay." I faked a yawn and a matching stretch. "I'm super-tired. I need a siesta after all that sun."

"Eat first," Grandma said. "Then sleep." The woman had a knife in her hand, and it was possible she knew how to use it. Maybe she could even toss it so it would nail me in the head.

"I can't save it for dinner?"

"No."

"Can I eat outside?" Where the goat is … Goats were known for eating anything that wouldn't eat them, but maybe even the goat would draw the line at okra stew.

Her expression told me she was the deadly kind of serious, so I dug in with my fork and a stack of bread. Taste wasn't the problem, it was the texture. My mouth knew when it was being told to chew a concoction of snails and swamp slime.

"Delicious," I said, pushing back from the table when I was done. "Time for a walk."

"No siesta?" Grandma asked.

"Too much good food." I patted my belly. "I need to walk it off."

"Walk, then. But do not leave the grounds alone, eh?"

"I won't."

I glanced down. My pants weren't on fire.

The compound was still and mostly silent. The air was stagnant. The sun had boiled it down to a thick sludge. Every breath felt like I was snorting soup.

I couldn't stop thinking about Dad and his dead childhood friend. What had happened to turn the two families into adversaries? I could have asked my grandmother, but she had made it clear I was to keep my head down and my butt in one piece. And I was willing to indulge her—to a point.

Unfortunately for her, that point was somewhere behind me.

Before lunch, I'd Googled and discovered that they were putting Dad's old buddy in the ground tomorrow, which meant the Greek Orthodox version of a wake was happening early this evening. And here I was without a black dress.

Yes, I could have gone to Xander on my knees and begged for a ride to another dress shop, but I didn't want to. I wanted to be free to do what I wanted, when I wanted to do it. Restrictions made me itch. It was fine to be a couch potato back home, to move from cubicle to couch, because that was my choice. Here there was only one choice: find Dad. From where I was standing—currently under the front archway, furtively watching for foot traffic—Grandma's orders were clashing with my goal. She'd skipped taking me to George Kefalas's funeral. I wasn't about to miss this one.

I needed wheels, and parked out front was Xander's black bullet, devouring sunlight. The dark tinted windows were down. The keys were swinging from the ignition. Not a family member in sight. Even the garage attendants were absent from their posts.

This car was practically begging for it.

It was a sign.

Gingerly, I opened the door to see if an alarm would sound, if half the family would come running. Nope, no alarm. I sat on the leather seat, swung my legs in. Xander had a lot of inches on me, so I pressed the button on the side of the seat and went for a slow ride, until my shoes touched pedal. Probably he left it here for someone to borrow. Why else leave the keys inside and the windows down? I fiddled with the rearview mirror, toggled the side mirrors. Perfect. Now I had a clear shot of the car's back and sides.

Stealing was such a dirty word. Borrowing was cleaner, more benevolent, more temporary. I could live with being a borrower. I'd take the car now, then I'd give it back. Maybe I'd even spring for a carwash. Nobody could call that stealing unless they were trying to be nitpicky. Hello, free carwash?

My breathing was fast and shallow. Maybe my head had justified what I was doing, but my body knew I was a thief. Probably I needed a nice, long drive to relax and shake the feeling. I twisted the key and the car came alive. Folk music flooded the interior, so my finger was forced to stab the knob. Trust me, it was a mercy killing. The windows rolled up at the touch of a button, and then I was off and rolling toward the security gate. I held my breath as the gate retracted. The guard didn't look up from the cell phone in his hand. Whatever he was watching it was riveting. Besides, it was his job to keep people out not in. And behind the dark glass I could have been Xander, for all he knew.

I glanced into the rearview mirror as the compound ate my dust. The guard was looking up.

Windows down. Music cranked. I'd found a station that played 80s hair bands. Bon Jovi was grinding on about some girl giving love a bad name, which suited me fine. To be honest, I felt pretty badass and kind of cool.

Perfection, except for the fact that my dad was still missing and I was no closer to finding him—not in any tangible way.

I pulled over at the nearest beach, watched the water sway. In my head, Dean Martin sang, drowning out the rock. The peninsula's arm made sure the sea was swimmer-friendly. Brightly colored boats bobbed like bath toys. Did I say brightly colored? Eye-searing was more accurate. The painters had pushed colors to their limits. Orange wasn't orange, it was fluorescent tangerine. Red was volcanic. Yellow was canary feathers on acid.

I called Detective Melas.

"They're looking for you," he said as soon as he answered.

"Already?"

"I heard you stole a car."

"Borrowed."

"Uh-huh."

"Hey, it was sitting there with the windows open and the keys in the ignition."

He thought about it for a moment. "Sounds like the car was asking for it."

"That's what I said." I got right down to business. "Did you see the body?"

"Yeah, I saw the body."

When it became obvious he wasn't going to say more, I gave him a poke. "And?"

"It was Cookie."

So the man who cried dead was really dead. Now I'd never have a chance to scope out my father's best friend, check him for signs of kidnapping.

"Were he and my father really friends?"

"Inseparable."

"And their families were cool with that?"

His laugh was short and blunt. "We're not talking *The Godfather* here. They were kids from the same background. Plenty of common interests."

"A posse of two?"

"No. There was a group—" He stopped. "No. Forget it, Katerina."

Too late. "Forget what?" I asked, employing my best '*Who me?*' tone.

"We're not talking good people here. They're not kids anymore. The games they play are adult. Cross them and people get hurt. People get *dead*."

"Okay," I said. "I'll stay away. Promise."

"Are your fingers crossed?"

"No."

Yes.

The Greek Orthodox church liked to get them in the ground fast. Dead one day, wake the next, in the ground the following morning. I knew what I was doing—shopping for something decent to wear to a wake—but I didn't know where I was going. The black bullet crept along Volos's main drag several times before I spotted a store that looked promising. I swung into a parking space, narrowly avoiding life as a paraplegic when a Range Rover tried to zoom into my slot.

"*Gamo ti putana*!" the teenaged driver screeched through her open window. Nice kid. She was going places with that mouth, but not into this parking space.

I smiled and waved, locked the car, then trotted to the hulking Marks & Spencer store on the corner of Ermou and Allonisou.

My phone chimed. Private caller. "Hello?"

Silence, and lots of it.

Xander. Who else wouldn't speak? No one, that's who.

"Wrong number," I said quickly and ended the call.

The phone rang again. "Hello?"

"Katerina?"

Holy hell. Grandma.

"Yes?"

"What are you doing?"

"Shopping."

"What for?"

"Funeral clothes. I'm not going to miss Cookie's funeral the way I did George Kefalas's."

"Xander is not happy you stole his car."

Xander complaining about me stealing his car was so pot calling the kettle black. In my mind criminals didn't get to complain when someone boosted their ride.

"Borrowed. I borrowed it."

"Stay right there. I will send someone to get you."

"No need," I said breezily, "I'll be back this evening."

"No you—"

"What's that?" I made crackling noises, hissed for added effect. "You're breaking up. Stupid phone!"

I hung up, stuffed my phone into my pocket and hoped it wouldn't ring again.

Dad would have been horrified. To him Baboulas was the monster under the bed and in the closet. No one hung up on the boogeyman when she came calling. What could I say—in his day there were no cell phones, otherwise he would have hung up on her, too. I was sure of it.

The British department store had everything, including a black sleeveless sheath perfect for funerals, wakes, and other solemn occasions. If I ever got audited by the IRS—God forbid—I could wear this dress. I went slightly more risky with the shoes. What I wanted was a shoe that could double as a weapon, and I found them. I could put out an eye with these tall, thin heels. Pair them with a hammer, I could stake a heart.

Half an hour later, I was carrying two bags out of the store. Xander's car was where I'd left it, but something was missing.

I would have sworn it had windows when I parked the thing.

Somebody honked. "Katerina?"

Oh look, Tweedledum and Tweedledumber—aka Takis and Stavros. They'd pulled up behind me, creating a blockage in traffic that no amount of cursing, horn-honking, and friendly hand gestures seemed to be fixing. To put it bluntly, Grandma's flunkies—my cousins—didn't give a crap.

"What happened to Xander's car?" Stavros called out. They were in

the SUV I'd driven to Makria—or one just like it. Inside, the talking-map harpy was firmly suggesting they take the next right turn.

"Somebody smashed all the windows. Some little cow in a Range Rover, I think."

"What did you do to her?" Takis said over the top of his passenger.

"Nothing she wouldn't have done to me. Survival of the fittest when it comes to city parking." That's the rule of cities all over the world.

"I hear you," Stavros said.

I squinted at them. "How did you find me?"

"It is a secret," Takis said, shrugging.

Stavros said, "GPS." Takis cuffed his ear.

No privacy anymore, I tell you.

Both guys got out. Takis made a lot of hand signals at passing traffic before making it to where I was standing. He shook his head at the busted car. "Xander is not going to like this."

I cocked my head. "How would we even know?"

"Oh, you will know," he said, voice grim. He held out his hand, wiggled his fingers. "Keys."

"No."

"Give me the keys."

"No."

"Somebody has to drive that car."

I blinked. How did he think it got here to begin with, magic? "I'll drive."

"Baboulas said one of us had to drive."

"The female head of one of Greece's biggest criminal organizations is sexist?"

"She's not a woman. She's a man with—" He jiggled two cupped hands on his chest. "Instead of—" Those same hands grabbed his crotch.

"Do it again." I folded my arms. "I didn't quite get it."

He grabbed his chest first, then his goobers. Behind him, Stavros grinned.

"Again," I said.

One more time. When he stopped, he narrowed his eyes. "Are you recording this?"

"No," I said. "But they were." I nodded to a couple of laughing tourists, their phones held out to capture the moment.

Not caring too much that the car was filled with beads of broken safety glass, I slid behind the wheel of Xander's car. I started it up, gave Stavros a smile and Takis a little wave. "See you on YouTube. Would you hurry up and move?"

I strode into Grandma's house like I hadn't just boosted a car and gone—as far as she was concerned—sort of missing. Sort of, because she'd known where I was all along.

"Hey," I said, reaching for one of her twisty cookies. This time she didn't slap my hand. The knife in her hand was too busy slicing paper-thin pastry into slender strings. "What are you making?"

"Pastry for *kataifi*." She didn't look up. "It is like baklava, but hairy."

"I had a piece the other day. I could eat more."

"Did you get clothes?"

"I did."

"Show me."

I pulled the dress out of its bag, held up to me so she could get a general idea, then showed her my lethal shoes.

She made an approving noise. "You could kill a man with those shoes."

That was the idea, if need be. "Insurance policy."

She nodded, kept on cutting. "Go get cleaned up. This evening we are going to pay our respects to the dead. I think you know who."

My jaw fell several inches. She was taking me to Cookie's funeral? Really?

"Katerina, my love, you look like a fish. You will never catch a man if you make that face."

I closed my mouth, but only because a hyperextended jaw gets uncomfortable after a while—just ask my ex.

"Someone told me Koulouris was Dad's best friend."

"Who told you?"

"A bird."

"Hmm," she said. "It is true, they were close."

"I also heard he's faked his death before."

She slid the long knife blade under the pastry strips, set them to dry on a wooden rack. "Sometimes it is necessary to play dead."

"Why?"

"A rat only sneaks out when it thinks the cat has crossed the river to Hades. It is not enough for the cat to go on a vacation—rats are clever. Some more than others."

"He's really dead this time," I said. "Detective Melas said so."

"Is he? We will see."

Chapter 10

WE WERE A JOKE. One old Greek widow, one cross-dresser—or however Aunt Rita classified herself—one fossil in a wheelchair, one mute henchman, and a newly minted car thief walked into funeral. Grandma had brought backup, but she ordered them to stay outside with the other Families' flunkies. The bartender—a.k.a. the grieving sister I'd met this morning—hurled herself at us as we stepped inside. Her eyes were wet and red. This morning, when the news was fresher, they'd been dry.

Nobody loves theater more than Greeks. That's why ancient Athenians invented it.

"My little brother is dead, I cannot believe it," she wailed. She dabbed at her eyes with a black handkerchief, carefully avoiding the damp bits. No salt this time—she didn't seem to recognize me.

My grandmother said all the right words on our behalf, then after the sister took her show on the road again, Grandma muttered, "*Zoi se mas*."

Life to us.

The air was clogged with flowers and incense. A priest was here somewhere, waving his thurible like this was a Grateful Dead concert. Cookie was hanging out in the living room in his coffin, lid wide open. White pedestals—Ionic—surrounded the gleaming wood box. Atop every one of them a sat huge arrangement of white lilies. A long line of mourners slowly shuffled past the dead man. One at a time they kissed his cheek, then moved on.

I wondered how many were here just to see if he was really dead this time. Not me—I believed Melas. If he said the guy was dead, the guy was dead. What I was here for was information.

"I'm not kissing a dead guy," I said.

"It's not so bad," Aunt Rita told me. "At least they don't try to slip you the tongue."

Grandma glared at her. "Show some respect for the maybe-dead."

We took our places at the end of the line. When it was our turn to say our goodbyes, my aunt squinted at him.

"He looks dead." She nudged me with her elbow. "Does he look dead to you?"

Grandma gave her the stink-eye, then moved on, leaving us to contemplate the remains of Cookie.

I wasn't sure exactly what dead looked like, but this seemed like a

convincing approximation of how death was depicted on TV. The remains of my father's once-best friend were waxy and well-dressed in one of those shiny suits mobsters were attracted to. It had to be tied to the criminal gene somehow, and I thought the cops were stupid for not using it to their advantage. Hold up a shiny suit in a roomful of suspects, cuff the guy who gravitates toward the hanger. Voila!

For what it's worth, I'd never seen Dad in a crook suit, so maybe my theory needed tweaking. I still wasn't comfortable with the idea of my father shaking down store owners for protection money, kneecapping, peddling drugs, or sticking his finger in any of the soggy Family pies. But to his credit, the man had escaped. And as far as I knew he really was a plain ol' vanilla truck driver. I'd believe that until someone showed me his secret stash of guns, money, and alternate identities.

Grandma was on the far side of the room, deep in conversation with a raisin and a prune. Given the company we were currently keeping, I had no doubt the two old men were fundamentally heinous people.

"He looks pretty dead," I said, hoping my answer was the right one.

Papou scoffed. "What do either of you know about death? I know a dead body when I see one." He stabbed his chest with a finger. "I know."

Aunt Rita stepped aside, swished her arm with a magician's flourish. She was shooting for Sophia Loren, with a black veil over her eyes and a black pencil skirt with a peplum jacket. The cleavage was all fake, but it was impressive. Need a turkey stuffed? Aunt Rita was your woman. When she was done you'd never know the turkey came with a gaping hole in its egg maker.

"Go ahead, see for yourself," she said.

"How can I see him? He is all the way up there! What were they thinking putting the coffin up so high? Prejudiced is what it is. They hate the disabled. They look down on us."

His chair was kind of low to the ground, but that's how wheelchairs are. Raising the center of gravity was begging for trouble.

"I guess I could take a picture with my phone," I said, not really committed to the idea.

He shook both hands at the ceiling. "At least there is one person here with a brain. Probably it is not you, though. Go on, take a picture."

I looked at Aunt Rita—for a way out mostly. She shrugged. Very helpful.

"Okay." I glanced around, hoping no one was watching us too closely. With my back to the coffin, I reached behind me, phone in hand and pressed what I hoped was the red button.

The flash went supernova.

"That's good," Papou said. "The more light the better. Did he blink?"

Nobody noticed—or if they did they were doing it discreetly.

"I don't think so."

He grunted. "Still not conclusive. Let me see the photograph." He snatched the phone out of my hand, fiddled with it a moment then said, "*Gamo ti mana sou*, your phone is *skata*!"

"You can't talk like that at a wake," Aunt Rita hissed.

"Who says? Cookie had a mouth like a toilet. He would be the last one to complain."

"Give me that." I grabbed my phone and peered into the screen. The photo was gone. "Oh well, too bad. I guess we'll never know."

"Do it again," the old man barked.

"Do what again?" came a new voice.

Uh-oh. Detective Melas.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. He looked good in a dark suit and tie. I was being all cool, trying not to notice, but my hormones were ogling him. Estrogen was stupid.

The way he was looking at me, testosterone was stupid, too.

"I should ask the same thing. Taking pictures of the dead man? *Tsk.*"

Did he just *tsk* me? "At least it wasn't a selfie," I said in my defense.

"Organized crime wakes and funerals are good." He glanced around the room, taking stock of the guest list. "All the bad guys in one place. I always come to Cookie's wakes."

"To arrest people?"

He held up the small crystal dish in his hand. On it was a chunk of what looked like biscotti. "For the food."

"You come to a wake for the food? There's something seriously wrong with you."

"Okay, so the wake isn't that great, but stick around for the *makaria* after the funeral tomorrow. Cookie's sister makes the best *koliva*. She's had a lot of practice."

A *makaria* being the meal after the funeral.

Melas made the boiled wheat dish sound appetizing, but come on, it was boiled wheat. How good could it be?

"I'll take your word for it." A quick glance behind me showed Papou was still holding up the line of mourners, trying to haul himself up by the coffin's brass rail. None of them looked worried; they were chatting among themselves. Aunt Rita was fake-grinning into her cell phone, checking her teeth for strays bits of food. And Grandma had moved on. Now she was knee-deep in conversation with a fossil with more rings around his trunk than the previous pair. His ears hung low

and his nose had eclipsed the rest of his face.

Where was Xander? I hadn't seen him since we walked into Cookie's house. No doubt he had blended in with the other sculptures—and there were myriad. Either Cookie or his sister—or both—were serious art collectors. With their taste I expected to see a velvet Elvis at any moment.

"How many times has Cookie faked his own death?" I asked Melas.

"At least a dozen. This is the sixth time he's taken it this far. When he does, he shows up not long after the burial. One time he coughed during the funeral."

I tried not to laugh. "What happened?"

"Nothing. He climbed out of the coffin, shot his cuffs, and told everybody they were having a party at his place to celebrate life."

"And people were okay with that?"

"More than okay. Cookie throws legendary parties."

I shot a quick glance at some of the other faces, but they were all strangers to me. "So who is who?"

"I keep forgetting you're new in town and you don't know all the players."

"So help me out."

"Forget it, honey." He looked me up and down. "You're safer not knowing this crowd. Want my advice—go home and forget you were ever here."

All his repetition about going home was starting to rub some of the shine off his spectacular looks.

Just kidding—no it wasn't.

"Not happening. Which of these guys were my father's friends?"

"You're not giving up, are you?"

"Not in this lifetime."

"Jesus," he said. "Over there." He nodded to a tight cluster of shifty-looking men, all around Dad's age, standing by a sculpture of some mythological dude or another grabbing his junk. "The one on the left is Dimitri Vrakas. They call him Jimmy Pants."

"Why?"

"The whole gang liked to Anglicize their names. It was the cool thing to do in the 70s."

"What did they call my father?"

"Mikey Far."

"Could be worse," I said. "The rest of them?"

"Johnny Deadly, Fish, and Tony Goats. Your father and Cookie rounded out the team."

"They don't look upset."

"They know Cookie."

I smoothed my dress, flipped my hair, set my eyes on the prizes on

the middle shelf. Dad was at the top; to get to him I'd have to work my way through the lower racks.

"What are you doing?" Melas asked me.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Looks to me like you're on your way to offer them a date of the professional kind."

"You need to get your eyes checked. I'm going to talk to them. Want to come with me?"

"Forget it," he said. "I'm the last person they want to see sniffing around Mikey Far's daughter."

"Is that what you're doing, sniffing?"

"If you weren't his daughter I'd be doing more than sniffing."

Flirting with the hot cop wasn't going to get me any answers, even if my hormones were having a blast. I gave him what I hoped was a mysterious smile and prepared for infiltration. I was going in cold. My plan was to wing it. I'd done some improv in high school and hoped it was like riding a bike or falling off a log. I put on a smile, but not a big one. Fake or not, this was still a wake. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Grandma tracking me. I couldn't tell if this was on her list of approved activities, but her plan and my plan weren't necessarily the same damn plan.

Dad's cronies quit talking as I approached. They looked cool, calm, and completely criminal.

"Hi," I said. "I'm Katerina Makris, Mikey Far's daughter."

"Katerina!" Jimmy Pants said. Then he hugged me like a long-lost friend and kissed me on both cheeks. They passed me round like a joint. "Where's Mikey been keeping you all these years?"

Jimmy was built like a stick figure. He had a knuckle for a nose and it leaned left. He looked like a guy comfortable with knifing a gut.

"America," I said. "I heard you guys were his best friends in the old days."

"You heard right. What's with you and the cop?" That was Fish—no first name that I knew of. He was short, round, could have body-doubled for Santa Claus.

"You know how cops are," I said, keeping it vague.

They all nodded like they knew.

"What's Mikey doing with himself these days?" Jimmy asked. "Long time no hear. He left and that was it."

"Normally he's a truck driver. But now he's just, you know, kidnapped." I focused on the details, tried to catch them in an unguarded moment, but either these guys knew nothing or they were used to playing their roles twenty-four-seven.

"Truck driving must be dangerous work in America," Jimmy said. "Did the kidnapper ask for anything?"

"Not yet."

"Strange." Tony Goats rubbed his chin. "Why kidnap somebody unless you want something in return?"

"What do you know?" Fish asked him. "You're a dentist."

"A dentist," I blurted. "Is that a code?"

They laughed. They laughed big, loud, and completely inappropriately for a funeral. And the person they were laughing at was me.

"It's a code for nothing. He's a dentist," Jimmy Pants said.

"Pediatric," Tony Goats added.

Jimmy Pants went round the circle. "Goats is a dentist, Fish is an accountant, Deadly sells mattresses …"

"You need a new bed, you come to me, eh? I can give you a good price." Johnny Deadly winked at me. Maybe he sold mattresses, but did he buy them first? Undecided.

"… and I teach high school Physical Education."

"He's a monster," Fish said.

Jimmy Pants shrugged. "I have high standards for my students. No fatties." He looked me up and down. "Do you exercise?"

"All the time."

Try never.

Genetics kept my weight mostly in the green zone. Neither of my parents had carried any real excess. If Dad sprouted the beginnings of a pot all he had to do was cut back for a week and he'd be back to his flat state. I was pretty much the same way, under certain conditions. PMS time was a danger zone. Those progesterone spikes turn me into an eating machine. Breakups had a similar effect. When I caught Todd munching a wiener, I dropped a guillotine blade on the relationship and immediately launched a sordid love affair with sugar and sodium. I kicked their butts out when my jeans refused to button or zip. Or slide over my hips.

A familiar face strolled past. Yianni Papagalos, the guy Grandma had invited to lunch. He stopped to gawk at me.

"You're still alive!" he said, registering surprise. Then he skittered away. Across the room, Papou was making parrot sounds, and he was still trying to get a good view of the coffin's contents.

"What's that about?" Jimmy Pants wanted to know.

I played the whole thing down. I didn't want Dad's buddies bolting when they knew I was a dead woman walking. "Nothing. Some guy wants to kill me, that's all." Casual. Like people took out contracts on my head all the time.

They exchanged looks. "What guy?" Jimmy asked.

"Nobody. Just a guy. Calls himself the Baptist. Have you heard of him?"

Johnny Deadly, mattress salesman, nodded. "We know the name."

"He's bad news," Fish added.

"Now," Tony Goats said. "I remember when he was shit on our shoes."

Jimmy Pants jostled him. The concern on his face as he looked at me was real. "Stay as far away from him as you can until he forgets about you."

"You know him?" I asked.

On the far side of the room, somebody yelled, "Eureka!" I glanced over just in time to see Papou boost himself into the coffin. People were watching but they weren't lifting a finger to stop him. Nobody interrupts the band when they're playing their biggest hit. By the time I got there, he was waving a mirror under Cookie's nose.

"Let's see if you're really dead now, eh?" He pulled a dressmaking pin out of nowhere and shoved it into Cookie's cheek.

The dead guy did nothing. Ask me, that was a good sign his death was a permanent affliction this time.

"Huh," Papou said as Aunt Rita and I helped him down. "I would have sworn he was faking again. He usually does."

"Let it go, old man," my aunt said. "He's dead."

"I wanted to make sure. I owe him a thousand euros."

"For what?" I asked.

"His *kokoras*."

My brain shorted. I took me a minute to do the math and realize Papou was talking about a genuine rooster, and that the male bird wasn't slang for *penis* in Greek. "His chicken?"

"Yes. Cookie runs a chicken fighting ring. Maybe I stole one of his best chickens."

"You stole a chicken?"

"I did it a favor."

"What happened to chicken?"

He shrugged. "What could I do? I let it go. Chicken fights are barbaric. But what do you expect, it was invented by Persians." He turned around in his chair. "Look at that! I started a new craze."

Sure enough, a woman was sticking her own pin into Cookie's face. When he didn't budge she pocketed the pin and moved on to the buffet table.

Grandma appeared at my side. Xander was with her.

"We are leaving," she said.

"We just got here."

"And now we are leaving. I do not want to miss *Greece's Top Hoplite*. One of the judges is a distant cousin."

"You could record it, you know," I told her.

"It is not the same," she said. "Spoilers everywhere."

Greek funerals were like a miniseries. Part One the day before the burial itself, Parts Two, Three, and Four the day of. First, everyone who'd ever met Cookie—and some, like me, who'd never laid eyes on the guy while he was breathing—wedged themselves into the church. Well, cathedral. *Ayios* Nikolas—Saint Nicholas—was God's McMansion. It sat a couple of blocks back from the Volos harbor, the focal point of an area filled with shops and cafes. A small playground hunkered to the right and back a bit. Above the towering double doors the pale brick had been interrupted to accommodate an arched mosaic of J.C. Himself, complete with a halo, just in case anyone forgot whose house this was. The clock tower was a separate structure that looked like an Egyptian obelisk. I didn't say it out loud. This crowd, it would only get me whacked.

The low wall—maybe a foot and a half—around the church had attracted the attention of local artists, who, once again, wanted to *fack* our mothers and the Virgin Mary. Man, these guys were desperate for a good time; they needed to hook up with the girl who leaves her number in the ladies' rooms all over the world.

Outside, heat echoed from the concrete squares underfoot. Between that and the killer sun, it was a lot like getting trapped in a pizza oven. Inside wasn't any better. The sun was gone but it had been replaced by humidity from all the bodies. We were hundreds of panting dogs, packed into a single kennel. And either a lot of someones had forgotten their antiperspirant or there was a skunk with the runs loose in here.

I tugged at the neckline of my black dress. All this sweating, my face was going to be pepperoni before long.

Today, the priest—what I could see of him between heads and shoulders—had abandoned black for the same outfit in white. Didn't seem right that the rest of us were stuck in black when the sun was dialed all the way up to HIGH outside.

The pallbearers had a tough job squeezing through the crowd, even with a battering ram-slash-coffin. Once they reached the front they set down the box, lifted the lid so that the dead man could see the altar. My guess was that his eyes would stay shut and he'd miss the show, but maybe Greeks did death differently to the rest of the world.

I'd bet money my father's kidnapper was sweating alongside the rest of us, probably in a shiny suit. I scanned the faces—the ones I could see—but they were a damp ocean.

Prayers were said, kisses were delivered one final time, then we all hurried back to our vehicles to tail the hearse to the cemetery, where

we all clumped in groups, according to allegiance. That's how my aunt put it.

"Here we go," Aunt Rita said, elbowing me, when the priest was done saying his Latin piece, graveside. "Watch the sister."

She gave great mourning, I'll give her that. With the acting skill of Streep, Cookie's sister hurled herself upon the coffin's almighty lid and howled, shoulders heaving, legs kicking. "Why, God? *Whhhhhy*? Oh, my brother, come back to me! I will even let you hold the remote!"

"Stick around a few hours, he'll be back," Papou hollered.

The grieving sister quit wailing for a moment. Her head snapped up. "Who said that?"

Everybody pointed.

"Don't mind me," he said, waving a dismissive hand. "Keep on doing what you were doing. You are very good at it. With those skills you could be a professional."

"I am going to kill you," Grandma muttered. "Not in your sleep—that is too good for you. From now on when you eat, be afraid."

"Why wait? I welcome death. Do it here. There is a coffin over there and it will be vacant soon."

Melas was right: Cookie's sister went nuts for the funeral feast. And her *koliva* was out of this world. The boiled wheat was shot through with sweet sultanas and those tiny silver dragées. It reminded me of a low-key rice pudding.

A bald guy with back hair (visible through his shirt) sidled up to me with his pack in butt-sniffing distance. He was too young for me and I was too old for his games. "Hey, Katerina," he said. "Are you having a good time, baby?"

"It's a funeral," I said, my mouth full of boiled wheat.

"So? You can still have fun at a funeral."

"How do you know my name?"

He shrugged. "Everybody knows." He gave me the full body scan, toes to tits, leaving me drenched with invisible slime. "You want to come to the bathroom with me? I'll let you hold it."

I set my fork aside on the tiny crystal plate, took a good look at his smirking entourage. "Are your boyfriends coming with us?"

"If you want. We can even take pictures."

Damn. I wasn't expecting that. Time to reload the snark shooter with different ammo.

"That could be a problem. I don't show up in photographs—or mirrors."

Sasquatch Jr. hurried away, hand on his neck.

I looked around until I spotted Xander. I grabbed his arm, pulled him closer. Nobody hit on me after that. The young guys were friendly, but distant. I couldn't stop them from leering across the room, but at least they didn't suggest quickies in the bathroom.

"Thanks," I said.

"You're welcome," Xander replied.

Just kidding. The man didn't say a word. The edges of his lips twitched, though. I wouldn't swear to it, but I think he wanted to smile.

Dad's buddies were all present again. They waved me over and doled out business cards—all except Jimmy Pants, who said I could swing by the school and get an extra workout with his classes anytime I wanted. I wanted to ask about the Baptist, but there were too many hands pulling me away.

Melas was there again, too. Apart from a brief and mutual nod, we didn't interact. He watched me though, his gaze dark and penetrating and unreadable.

I mingled, talked to people who were more interested in meeting Grandma's granddaughter than answering questions. They were tightlipped and wary when it came to the subject of my father. They'd heard the news of his abduction but … eh, that's the business.

"Did you learn anything?" Grandma asked me on the ride home. We were in the limo again. Takis was driving and Aunt Rita was riding shotgun with her hat and veil. Xander and Papou were in the SUV behind us. Papou was in time-out for asking Cookie's sister what time she expected him to rise from the grave.

"Sure," I said. "I learned a lot of things. Mostly that Greeks don't like answering questions."

"That is all you learned?" She sounded disappointed, as though I'd failed a test.

"Was that a test? Because I'm not a fan of tests."

"Life is a test, Katerina."

"Thanks for that, Socrates."

She laughed but the edge of it was ragged and sharp. A warning laugh. I knew what she wanted: respect. But respect doesn't come automatically with age and position in life. Other people respected and feared her, but I didn't trust her. She'd demanded a glimpse of my cards while withholding her own. That reticence made me wonder if we were on the same team, playing the same game. Something told me she was chess and I was naked *Twister*.

Okay, so my game was more like Hangman. My strategy was to guess wildly at letters until either the kidnapper's name was spelled out or the noose tightened around my neck. But my game was an honest one. I wanted to find Dad. No ulterior motives, no fear of

pulling the wrong string and having an empire unravel on my head.

I angled my head so the headrest could do its job. Eyes closed, I sifted through the past couple of day's events, until I was left with one tiny flake in the pan. It had a gold cast, but there was no knowing yet if it was fool's gold or the real deal.

Dad's old buddies knew the Baptist. Tony Goats let it slip that the psycho nut was more than just a name to them. Which made me wonder if Dad had known him, too.

I awoke in a room that wasn't mine, in a house that wasn't home, in a country that was pretending to be my friend. The room was dark and the night had hauled in some muscle: dense clouds that kept the stars a secret. On the bedside table my phone seared the time into my retina. It was after midnight, but only just.

My body tensed as footsteps approached my door. There was a soft one-knuckled knock, then Grandma said, "Katerina, get dressed and come to the kitchen." In the dark I felt around for old faithful jeans and tugged a T-shirt down over my head.

Grandma wasn't alone in the kitchen. Xander was standing by the door, arms crossed, as solid and strong as a tree. His face was passive and gave nothing away. Shocking, I know. He was dressed for trouble —probably breaking and entering—in black boots, black cargo pants, tight black T-shirt.

"What's going on?"

Besides a crime.

"You are going with Xander."

"At midnight? Where?"

"You will see," Grandma said.

Let me tell you now, it's not reassuring when a mobster tells you to take a ride with their henchman after midnight. In fact, my digestive tract had suddenly decided it was going through a kind of menopause, with hot and cold flashes. The old woman was my grandmother, yeah, but this was someone who allegedly snuffed her own brother-in-law. But I trotted out to the garage behind Xander, because what else could I do? If I didn't move, he'd move me. He'd done it before.

"If I'm going anywhere with you in the middle of the night it's in the front seat."

He opened the back door. In retaliation, I folded my arms and showed him my best Xander impersonation. He remained unamused.

Somehow—by the power of brawn, I suspected—I ended up in the backseat anyway. Alone. Again. No access to the radio or my pride. All in all, Greece wasn't shaping up to be good for my dignity.

We were taking Xander's car. The windows were still gone but someone had thoughtfully swept out all the glass.

"Really? You couldn't find another car?"

He fired up the engine and we blasted out of Dodgeopolis, headed for God knows where.

Chapter 11

THE CEMETERY WAS DARK. I don't know why I was surprised, but there I was, eyebrows slightly raised, mouth open enough for mosquito to zip in on a quest for blood. It looked different. By day it had seemed like a peaceful place to be dead, if you had no other choice. But in the mostly moonless and cloudy night, it wore thick, black shadows and swam in swirling, churning pools of deep ink, waiting, I was convinced, to suck grave robbers and Americans to the bottom.

This was it: my end. Xander had brought me to the graveyard to do the deed. This way he wouldn't have to go too far to ditch my body.

"Oh God, I don't want to die. I didn't mean to steal your car and get the windows smashed."

He looked at me like I was a few slices short of a loaf.

"You're not going to kill me?"

He shook his head.

Oh. Well. "I think I'll wait in the car."

Xander shrugged like it was my funeral and I was welcome to it. He vaulted the wall, leaving me standing on the sidewalk, which shared the same cozy atmosphere as the graveyard.

Probably it was a haunted sidewalk. For all I knew, ghosts were wafting through me right now.

At least if I went with Xander I wouldn't be alone—right? I really didn't want to hang here solo, so I sat on the wall, swung my legs over, and hoped I wouldn't get sucked into Hades.

Grandma's muscle tucked my hand into his, pulling me along behind him like a kid's toy. Warm hand. Nice. It shot hot sparks up my arm. For a moment I wondered if I was having a stroke or heart attack. Didn't those start with fire-like tingling? I kept walking, waiting to see if my brain or heart would short circuit, dropping me to the ground like I'd sassed an American cop.

Xander threaded us between grave markers for what felt like miles. A July night in Greece was warmer than a July night in Portland. Mid to high sixties. Heavy and still. Air thick with ghosts and ghouls and other supernatural cooties I couldn't see. How Xander knew where he was going was a mystery. It didn't look like the death cooties bothered him. What did it take to faze the guy? Because I was seriously fazed.

Suddenly, he stopped. I almost rear-ended him, which, for the record, isn't my thing at all. Which possibly contributed to my ex

finding sexual fulfillment on the end of a sausage.

My pupils began to dilate. I recognized where we were now: Cookie's grave. Xander trudged over to a nearby tree, a creepy, drooping long-fingered thing that wanted a piece of me. Probably my soul. He leaned against the trunk. Slid to the ground. Rested his forearms on his knees.

Not me. No way was I going to be bait for a soul-eating tree. So I sat some distance away and waited for a dead man to rise.

By 2:00 a.m. the sandman was tugging on my eyelids. Still, I couldn't stop thinking about Dad. He was alive, I was sure of it. I'd know if he was gone. I wasn't sure how this was going to play out. Realistically, there was no way anyone was just going to hand him over if I knocked politely on their door—just as Grandma said—and I knew it. That didn't stop me wanting it to be that easy.

"Playing bodyguard isn't going to work. I'll never stop looking for Dad," I said. "So you can work with me or against me."

Eyes straight ahead, focused on the grave, Xander kept right on saying nothing.

"But I know knocking on doors isn't going to work, so I need to do something that will work." I nudged him with my toe. "I'm open to suggestions."

Nothing.

"How did you get mixed up with my family anyway? Please don't tell me my grandmother demanded your parents' firstborn."

He neither confirmed nor denied it, which was meaningless.

"I know." I sat up straight. "You've got a phone, I've got a phone. You could text your answers."

More silence. For all I knew he had me on ignore.

I changed positions again, stretched out on the grass. "I miss my father."

This time Xander nudged me. I followed his line of sight to the grave, where the freshly shoveled soil was jumping.

Yikes!

My heart told me this was either the beginning of a zombie apocalypse or a vampire infestation, and that it was pointless to run but I should at least try, that way I could die secure in the knowledge that I done my best.

My head said, *Puhlease, it's just a dead guy clawing his way out of a grave. It happens all the time, especially when we're talking Cookie's grave. Sheesh.*

Ask me, my heart was probably right, but my head had control of

my moving parts. So I sat there cross-legged and watched a fist punch through the dirt, followed by a second fist, and eventually, a head. The not-so-dead guy had his back to us.

Cookie scrambled out, having a tough time with the shifting dirt. But he finally made it. He began dusting himself off, obviously not happy about the soil situation on his once-shiny suit.

"Cookie," I said.

He jumped. "Who are you?"

"Katerina Makris."

Christos Koulouris was attractive, but he was no Sean Connery. From here it would be downhill. Maybe he'd even been coasting down the hill for a while.

"Makris." He thought about it for a moment, then pointed two index fingers at me. "You're Mikey Far's daughter. I heard you were here."

Oddly enough, he didn't seem all that perturbed that we were hip to his charade. Maybe that's how he was—I couldn't say. And Xander couldn't say either, because when did he ever say anything?

I smiled, big and wide. "It's good to meet you. I heard you were my father's best friend."

He looked past me to Xander, who was sort of looming.

"Ignore Frankenstein's monster," I said, waving my hand.

"I remember you," Cookie said, still pointing. He was down to one finger now, though. "You were the one who took a photo at my wake. Did I look convincing?"

"Papou deleted it by accident, so I can't say."

"That old bastard," he said. "He owes me a thousand euros."

"Knowing him, you'll never see it."

His shoulders slumped. "Yeah, I know. What's a pretty girl doing in a cemetery with one of Baboulas's apes?"

"You were my father's best friend, right?"

"I was. But it's been a long time. Decades."

"He's been kidnapped."

"I heard."

Was it just me or was there something strange about this whole thing? Xander was doing a whole lot of nothing except standing back while I did the talking.

Not that he could do the talking part, but still …

My phone buzzed in my front pocket. For all I knew it was a push notification from *Candy Crush*, letting me know all my lives had refilled, but I had to check.

"Excuse me," I said.

"Don't mind me." He turned around, breathed in a big lungful of night. "I'm going to stand here and enjoy the fresh air. My God, it

smells good. If you are ever trapped in a coffin, make sure you don't fart. Hold it even if you risk exploding."

Good advice. I pulled the phone out of my pocket, checked the message splashed across the front. *Consider him a gift*. I looked at Xander. He shrugged, but there was a smile in his eyes.

Well, well.

"How did you hear about my father?"

Cookie turned back around. "What was that?"

"My father. How did you hear he was missing?"

He scratched his head. "Did my sister send a car? There's supposed to be a car—there always is."

I didn't know what happened to his ride. There was one car on the main road and it was ours. Xander folded his arms, beefed up his biceps, which were already pretty beefy.

Mmm … beef.

"It's a small community," he continued. "Everybody knows everything—most of the time. It is no secret that your father disappeared. Baby Dimitri told somebody, who told somebody else, and then it came back to me. That's how it is."

"He didn't disappear. Two men took him from our home."

"Who says?"

"The next-door neighbor."

"What sort of person is that neighbor? Honest? Reliable? A person who sees what they want to see?"

"He's a former judge."

He spat on the ground. "Lawyers. Who can trust them?"

"Why did you fake your death … this time?"

He shrugged. "Business. I screwed up. Told the wrong guy the right story. Now I've got a *kolotripas* chasing me."

"The Baptist?"

"That's what he calls himself now, can you believe it? It's a terrible name. Grandiose, dramatic."

"He just sounds Greek to me."

"Heh-heh. How do you know him?"

"He wants to kill me, too." I lined up my next question. "The rest of your old gang, it sounded to me like they know him."

"*Malakas*, all of them. They know nothing." He looked at his watch. "You seem like a nice girl. I have no sons, no daughters who will miss me or come looking for me if I vanish. All I have is my sister. We're the last of our line. What happens when we are gone? Nothing, that is what. You want to find your father? Who benefits if he disappears? Did anyone ask for ransom? I don't think so."

"No," I admitted. "Not yet."

"They won't. Ransom money is not what they want, I guarantee it."

Frustration hooked its fangs into me. For a moment I could see it, why the CIA did what it did. Talking a person out of information was painfully slow. Why waste all that time on chit chat when shattering a kneecap can save hours?

"What do you think they want?"

"If he was truly kidnapped? Everything."

Well, that was … specific. "Truly kidnapped? Do you think he wasn't?"

He plucked another question out of the hat. "How did you know I was alive?"

I didn't. All I had was hearsay. "Come on, how many times have you faked death now?"

"Too many," he said woefully. "I've lost count. When we were boys, your father and I used to fake our deaths all the time. Our mothers would beat the shit out of us with the wooden spoons for scaring them. But we always did it again. We did other things, too. More than once, we pretended we had been kidnapped—even sent ransom notes to our families." He tapped the side of his head with a finger. "I wonder if that is what your father is doing now."

It was possible, I supposed, but to what end? Dad wouldn't freak me out for nothing. He'd let me know he was okay, that it was all a ruse.

Wouldn't he?

And what about the guys who hauled him out of his house? That was an unnecessary bit of theater, if he was faking. If Reggie Tubbs was telling the truth.

"Why would he do that?"

He looked past me to Xander, who was still playing big, bad beefcake. "Maybe he knew the Baboulas was coming for him. Say, can I get a ride?"

Cookie stared at Xander's car. "I don't know," he said. "It doesn't look safe."

It did look bad. "It's fine, and Xander hardly speeds at all."

"What happened to my car?"

I wasn't all that familiar with the landscape, but I knew there wasn't a cliff or lake handy, so wherever his car was it was in one piece-ish. If it was around here.

"Maybe there wasn't one."

"My sister never forgets."

"Maybe this time she did. Or she was busy. Where are we taking you?"

His eyes went shifty, darting from side to side. "Why?"

"How can we give you a ride if we don't know where to go?"

"Oh." That seemed to placate him. "To the Volos harbor."

We got in. I aimed for the front seat, but somehow wound up in the back again. Xander, that rat, let Cookie steal the shotgun position.

"For the record, I hate you," I said, shooting him my dirtiest look. Unfortunately, the whole nighttime thing meant it was wasted. Still, I'm pretty sure I caught a glimpse of white teeth in the rearview mirror. Jerk.

He revved the engine and the car peeled away from the curb. Cookie held onto the sides of his seat.

Now that I was thinking about it, Xander did me a favor shoving me in the backseat. All that wind rushing in the window, he was stopping it with his face and big shoulders.

The car slid through the night. Before long, we reached civilization, in the shape of streetlights and dead-eyed commercial buildings. The city had packed up most of its toys for the night, but there were still a few players playing. Drunks, partygoers, club-hoppers, drug dealers, hookers hooting on the corners. We stopped at an intersection and one of them ambled over. Her wardrobe embraced the *less is less* philosophy, her jewelry the *more is more*. Lots of gold, too many sequins, a ton of rhinestones, a minimal amount of spandex.

"You looking for a date, baby?" She stuck her head in the window. All these broken windows and we were still treated to a cloud of *Poison*. Then she caught sight of Xander and Cookie in the front seats. "Never mind," she said, backpedaling so fast her clear heels almost left skid marks on the pavement.

"Thanks for asking anyway," I called out, waving.

The light turned green. Xander punched the gas.

I unclipped my belt, scooted to the center, stuck my head between the front seats. "You guys know her?"

Xander fiddled with the sound system. Suddenly his awful music was all in the back with me.

"Not cool," I said, diving forward. He caught me with a shovel-sized hand, pushed me back into place. "Very not cool."

"That corner … she is one of Baby Dimitri's," Cookie said, responding to my question.

"Baby Dimitri's got sex workers?" I tilted my head. "Does Grandma have sex workers?"

Xander shook his head. For him, that was a monumental leap in communication.

"No," Cookie said. "She has always refused to exploit women."

"Good for her." I flopped back in the seat. At least my family wasn't completely corrupt. I hunted around, found another question. "What

was my father like when he was a boy?"

"A monster. We both were. But he had a good heart, for a piece of shit."

Nice to know. "Where do you go, you know, when you fake death?"

"Mykonos," he said. "Tits and balls everywhere. If you can't find it in Mykonos it doesn't exist."

That's what I'd heard.

We stopped seaside, not far from where his boat was apparently moored. Xander wasn't content to dump Cookie at the side of the road, so we escorted him along the dark dock.

"Huh." Cookie scratched his head. "It's not here."

Sure enough, there was a big gaping boat hole where his boat was supposed to be.

"Maybe a friend borrowed it?" I suggested.

"Nobody knows I have this boat."

"Maybe a stranger borrowed it. A tourist?" I fished around for ideas, but they sucked. I sounded lame even to myself. "Maybe it's like a car: you parked it somewhere else but forgot?"

I trotted to the end of the concrete jetty, no a clue what I was looking for. One boat was pretty much like another to me.

"Whoa!" I said, noticing something bright in the distance. "Somebody's having a party out there. Pretty. The've got fireworks."

The men jogged over to where I was standing, hand shielding my eyes. The harder I squinted, the more the lights came into focus. Those lights? Yeah, they weren't lights.

"My mistake," I said. "It's a fire. A big boat bonfire."

We all turned and looked at the empty spot where the boat was supposed to be.

"I bet that's not your boat," I said, helpfully.

"*Gamo ti putana*," Cookie swore. "That was my favorite boat."

"You have other boats?"

He nodded to a small skyscraper hulking in the harbor. It was red and white and stained with rust. A tugboat was slowly dragging it back out to sea.

"Only ships. That is mine, but it's going to Italy."

"It's not too late," I said. "You could pretend to be a sailor and they could drop you off in Mykonos."

The tugboat turned back toward dry land. We stood there watching the rust bucket sail away.

"Okay, now it's too late," I said.

Cookie's arms flopped at his side. "Now what am I going to do?"

"Go home?"

"I can't go home. Aspasia will be furious if I cut into her official

mourning period. She enjoys playing the grieving sister."

So I'd noticed. "I guess you could come home with us."

He looked hopeful. "Could I?"

"I'm sure Grandma would be okay with it. The compound is huge."

Behind him, Xander was wearing an expression that said the chances of Grandma being cool with a rival for a houseguest—even if he was her son's former best friend—were zero.

"Well," Cookie said, glancing mournfully at the still-burning boat. "I guess I could—at least until I get another boat."

Grandma's face was set firmly to sourpuss. "I cannot believe you would bring that man here without my permission."

We'd rocked up to the compound with our guest, and Grandma was there waiting. She played the gracious host, directing Cookie to the room where he used to stay when he slept over in the old days. When he was safely ensconced in his room, she ordered two of the cousins to guard the room. If he coughed, if he farted, she wanted to know about it immediately.

Then she had turned her attention to me.

Now we were in her kitchen. I was at the table, one leg tucked under my butt, while she hunched over the single gas burner she used for making coffee. Tonight hot chocolate was on the menu. She poured the steaming chocolate and milk into a mug and sat it front of me.

If she was trying to score brownie points she was kind of succeeding. It was almost like she was a real grandmother.

"He had nowhere else to go," I said. "What were we supposed to do, leave him on the dock?"

"Much better idea. You should have done that. Even better, push him into the sea and let the fishes have him. Oh well," she said. "I will kill him in the morning."

"What? Xander and I went to a lot of trouble bringing him back here!" Okay, not really, but sometimes during an argument you have to exaggerate. A man's life was on the line.

She groaned and lowered herself into the chair across from me.

"He fucked me in the *kolos* on a business deal a few years ago. Because I was his best friend's mother, he mistook me for a *pousti*. I have been biding my time." She took in the horror on my face. "Do not worry, Katerina. That is business and he knows it. And the timing is very good. Everybody already thinks he is dead. Only Aspasia knows he is not, and I do not think she will mind too much if I kill him. She will get his business and be able play the grieving sister for the rest of

her life."

She made it seem almost reasonable.

"But he's Dad's best friend."

"There are no friends in this business. Only alliances; and they are made and broken all the time."

"Sounds like politics."

"It is politics—but more civilized."

That was debatable, but I wasn't in a debating mood.

"I'm going to bed," I said. "I'm beat. Don't kill him before I get up, okay?"

She nudged the warm milk toward me. "Drink. I made it for you. The least you can do is drink it or I will be very offended."

I doubted that, but with me being half Greek she'd managed to tug the strings that pulled on my conscience's guilt center. I picked up the mug and sipped.

"Why did you send us to the cemetery?"

"It was not my idea. Xander wanted to take you. He said you should have the opportunity to talk to Cookie about your father, in case maybe he knows something."

"Xander said all that?" I downed the rest of the chocolate milk in one long, hot swallow. "Is it just me or does Greek milk taste weird?"

"Not all milk, just that one cup."

I narrowed my eyes. "Why?"

"I am going to miss you," she said, reaching across the table for my hand. "You are my only granddaughter, and I wish I could keep you here with your family forever. But you have to go."

"Help."

My heartbeat went wonky. The room was fuzzing up. There was a metallic taste in my mouth like I'd been sucking on a spoon. Behind Grandma, the Grim Reaper was looking grim. Probably that's how he got his name. Also, he had Xander's face.

Oh my God, my own grandmother was killing me! Grandmas didn't do murder—not on their grandkids.

Except murder was kind of what my grandmother did. Probably poison was a business expense, tax deductible.

Chapter 12

THERE WAS a light at the end of the tunnel, but Mom wasn't there. Takis was, though. And oddly enough, there was no handbasket in sight. If I was going to hell it was in my bed with my pillow—the American one.

Death was all so confusing. Which was weird. I'd figured it was the great simplifier.

"I don't want to go to hell," I mumbled. Someone had stuffed my dead mouth with cotton and aluminum nails. So far this hell gig tasted awful. And it could only get worse. I'd heard the jokes, seen the artistic depictions. There was going to be fire or ice or a river of crap. Probably all three.

"Hey, Katerina, your milk is bad. Is it supposed to have chunks?"

I opened one eye again. "Was that Stavros?"

"He's making coffee," Takis said.

"In hell?"

"No, in your kitchen."

"My kitchen?" I sat up. "I'm not dead?"

His face contorted into a confused shape. "Why would you be dead?"

"Because Grandma poisoned me?"

Unless the rules had changed, poison and death generally went together, otherwise it wouldn't be poison.

He laughed. "Hey, Stavros! Katerina thinks Baboulas poisoned her!"

Laughter wafted into my bedroom all the way from the kitchen.

"Relax, you're not dead," he assured me. "But we had to get you home somehow, so she drugged you."

I flopped back down, let the familiar mattress and bedding hug me. "Drugged me. Great."

"At least she didn't poison you."

"Heh," I said into my pillow. "I might have overreacted."

Reality swam in, threw a wet blanket over my face and chest. I was home but home wasn't where I needed to be right now.

Stavros wandered into my room, steaming coffee mug in his hand. The coffee was, blissfully, for me. No milk but there was plenty of sugar.

"Takis wanted to dump you here and leave, but you are family. You cannot dump family."

Takis spluttered. "That's not what I said."

"Yes, you—"

"Okay, okay." He held up his hands. "Maybe I said it—who remembers?"

"I remember—" Stavros started.

"You want Baboulas to kill us? Keep talking." He smacked the bed, making the bedcovers jump. "We have to go."

I kicked aside the covers, discovered I was fully dressed, boots and all. Ready for action. But first I had to pee and brush my teeth. The coffee I could take to-go.

"Let's do it," I said.

Takis wagged a finger. "No, no, no. Not you. Just me and the idiot."

"The idiot and me," Stavros said.

"Not a chance, Bozo." I couldn't believe he had the gall. "Dad's in Greece, so that's where I'm going."

"Baboulas says no."

I glanced around my room. It seemed smaller, shabbier, which struck me as odd because I'd spent several days living in a freaking dump, in close proximity to a goat and an outhouse.

"Why?"

Takis shrugged. "We don't know. She gives orders, we follow orders. That's how it works."

"Does she ever let you see your balls?"

Stavros guffawed. Takis, not so much.

My core temperature was rising. Last time I checked I was a grown woman. I'd chewed through the umbilical cord years ago, although—okay—Dad was one of my best friends. But I was my own person. I had a life, a job, my own … Okay, I had a life and a job.

Well, I didn't have the job anymore, but whose fault was that?

Grandma's.

Her petty dictatorship was really starting to piss me off. Who did the old bat think she was—family? So we were swimming in the same gene pool, so what? Where had she been my whole life? If she knew where Dad was all these years why not *be* a grandmother? There were times I could have used someone who cared.

"Why?" I asked. "Why did she send me home?"

"To keep you safe."

"Ha! I don't need protecting. She needs to spend less time and energy worrying about me and more time looking for her son. So, let's go."

Then that little twerp Takis pulled out a gun, had the audacity to point it in my direction.

"Sit," he said. "Stay."

"I hate you."

"Okay. Good. No problem. As long as you stay."

"As soon as I get back to Greece, I'm going to kick your non-existent ass."

"Ha-ha. That is a good story. But no. Where is your passport?" He glanced around the room. "That's right, you have no passport. You will have to stay here in America."

"I can get a passport."

His glee dimmed. "Just like that?"

I snapped my fingers. "Just like that." Could be I was telling the truth—I wasn't sure. A passport had been low on my wishlist, due to lack of funds and inclination to travel. What if I buzzed off overseas on a pleasure trip and Dad befell some kind of disaster? My fear of losing Parent Number Two had held me back. And look what happened.

Disaster, that's what.

Now I was standing in my childhood—and adulthood—room making claims that may or may not be true, to get that parent back. I'd say anything, at this point, to catch a ride on Grandma's plane.

"Baboulas will make some calls," Takis told me. "Then you will discover America will not give you a passport."

My hope swirled the drain, poured into the garbage disposal. The switch flicked on and crushed that hope into paste. Then Takis blasted what was left of it away, because he was a big, fat, skinny jerk.

"There is no way for you to go back to Greece. If Baboulas doesn't want you there, no one can help you."

For an indeterminate amount of time I stood in the kitchen, doing nothing, staring at the wall. A peeping Tom could be forgiven for thinking I was auditioning for the next *Paranormal Activity*. I felt hollow, as though my insides had been scooped out and replaced with refrigerated air. Dad was lost, and I couldn't do a thing about it from here. Portland was my home, but it was also the deadest of ends, and here I was wearing cement boots.

Okay, they were leather. But they *felt* like great, honking concrete blocks.

Calling the police again was out of the question. Ditto the feds. I'd been in and out of the country illegally; Dad was a former mobster; and Grandma operated a crime syndicate. They'd show their sympathy with handcuffs and one-on-one time with Muffy, my new prison wife.

My eyes stung. My face was dripping. I was crying and didn't know it until now. Coffee. I needed coffee. A Portlander couldn't do anything without coffee first—and I was still more Portlander than

Greek. My sorrows were begging to be drowned in the bitter bean and a mountain of sugar.

I looked in the fridge, pulled out the milk. Sniffed. Gagged. Stavros was right, a person could go bobbing for chunks in the milk, so I jumped into my Jeep and zipped to the supermarket.

The Oregon sun was making a valiant effort, but it couldn't poke me in the eye the way the sun in Greece had. It was more even-tempered here, less furious. *Get a latte and chillax*, it said. *Enjoy me before the rain swings back around*. I wasn't in the mood for sun. What I wanted was rain—all the rain, but the sun was busy hanging loose in the sky.

My clothes were last night's. There was graveyard dirt on my knees and butt. The world I was walking in felt unreal, as though I were a misplaced object. A shower had been out of the question. If I took off these clothes, shot my skin clean with hot water, Greece would be gone, and Dad along with it.

I grabbed milk, bread, a frozen pizza, and paid for them robotically at the self-checkout, then slouched back to my Jeep, zero pep in my step. Then I stopped and blinked. It felt like someone was watching me. Not casually, but with purpose, as if I was something that needed to be observed.

So sue me, I was feeling twitchy.

The drive home was slow. My foot was reluctant, my nerves shot. Five minutes after the Jeep conked out in the driveway I was still sitting inside, chewing my lip, wondering what to do next. I scooted out in the same lifeless daze.

"Hey, Kat!"

Ugh. Reggie Tubbs. He was on the porch, as usual. In his robe, also as usual, airing out his dusty, old family jewels. His old Mercedes was gone. In its place on the driveway was a spanking new Lexus.

"Blow me," I muttered.

He cupped a hand behind his ear. "Can't hear you."

"I said, 'Just show me.' "

"You're no fun." He tied his robe. Sat. "Where you been, Kat? Was getting worried you'd disappeared."

"I was abducted by the Greek mob."

He laughed. "Good one."

"True story. Every word of it."

His expression said he didn't believe me. Good thing I wasn't looking for validation. "How's Mike?"

"Still missing. New car?"

"Rough business," he said, shaking his head. "Somebody set it on fire."

That sounded … familiar.

"They catch the vandals?"

"Naw. Could have been anyone who did it. I got all kinds of threats back in the day. Ain't nothing in this world worse than people." He thought about it for a moment. "Except maybe Brussels sprouts."

He was onto something there.

"Hey, Mr. Tubbs?"

"Yeah?"

"I kind of need a passport in a hurry."

"How big of a hurry?"

"Today."

He gnawed on it a moment. "Could be I know a gal."

"Can you call her, please?"

"What do I get out of it?"

Oh jeez. "What do you want?"

"Could you fake it for me? Pretend you don't want to look at Reggie Junior? My kinks are changing. Now it gets me hotter when a woman doesn't want to look."

"I don't want to look at it!"

"Oooh, yeah, just like that." He grinned, flashing me with the blue-white pearls in his mouth. That level of whiteness was unnatural. He'd spent a lot of time in the dentist's chair swallowing peroxide to strike news anchor-white.

"You're sick," I told him.

"I know. I should get help." He sat there. Looked at me.

I rolled my eyes and got moving.

"Hey, Kat," he called out. "Give me your number. I'll have Betsy call you."

Reggie Tubbs's gal Betsy worked at the Bureau of Consular Affairs. She could work magic in forty-eight hours, she told me, provided I wasn't on anyone's watch or hit list. I ponied up all my paperwork, and hoped Grandma's finger wasn't in this American pie.

While I waited, I sweated. I called friends, assured them I was alive. Mostly they hadn't noticed I was missing. It's not that they were bad people or they didn't care, but they had lives and kids and grandmothers who weren't mobsters. I didn't tell them about Dad or Greece or the psycho killer who wanted me dead, but I made a lot of the right noises to show I cared.

I called Bryan, my boss, to let him know I'd be taking time off.

"Aww, hell," he said. "Take all the time you need. It'll be months before the insurance pays out—if ever. The Fire Marshal's calling it arson."

"Arson! Gee, do they have any clues who did it?"

"They think it was me," he said in a sad voice. "I had a teeny, tiny misunderstanding with the IRS."

"Wow, that's a bummer."

"Tell me about it. And I fell down some steps and broke my legs, so now I can't even kill time on the golf course."

I told him to keep in touch and let me know when—if ever—I could come back to work. Then I got packing—literally. Takis and Stavros meant well—okay, not always, but sometimes—but they sucked at packing. I did a mountain of laundry, cleaned the house from top to bottom, then waited on the couch for the courier to knock at the door with my pristine new passport. I also spent as much time as possible in the bathroom, whether I needed to go or not. Never again would I take indoor plumbing for granted.

I had a plan. It wasn't a good one. But a bad plan was better than no plan. And it involved getting on Detective Melas's good side. Probably it was doomed to fail, but I had to try. He was the only person I knew in Greece who wasn't Family. Although, his allegiances did seem shaky. Yeah, he was a cop, but he knew the Family too well. This was a guy with Xander plugged into his address book.

The first part of the plan went like this: Go to Melas's house, knock on the door, and ask for help and maybe a recommendation for a decent hotel, where I could lie low while hunting for the Baptist. Get that giant ape off my back before resuming my mission to find Dad.

After that … I wasn't sure. But I had the starting point semi-nailed down … to Jell-O.

Airline employees and airport personnel don't trust cash payments for airfares these days, so I'd already decided I'd have to raid Dad's safe and put the cash in my account, or risk the Department of Homeland Security's scrutiny and uncomfortable probes—possibly anal probes. I had a theory that middle-of-the-night UFO encounters were really the NSA and DHS guys dressed up in funny costumes to throw people off. Dad kept a few thousand tucked away for emergencies, in case of EMPs, zombies, or bankers robbing the world blind in a dazzling financial finale. *The world ends, people will still prefer cash. Stupid bits of paper!* he once told me. I'd pay him back. Under the circumstances he'd understand. Desperate measures and all that.

The safe was behind the medicine cabinet in the master bathroom. I'd watched him install it when I was ten. *If a thief stops to look in the medicine cabinet*, he said*, what he wants is drugs. He won't pull the medicine cabinet off the wall, searching for a safe.*

What if it's a girl thief? I'd asked.

A girl thief is even better. She will be too busy cleaning the bathroom to

find the safe.

Dad could be a chauvinist. He left Greece but Greece never left him.

I loosened the wall anchors, lifted the cabinet off the wall. Sure enough, the safe was still braced between the studs, where it had been since I was ten. I knew the combination, but I'd never used it before. Fingers crossed it hadn't changed. My hands shook as I twirled the dial. He'd shunned all the usual suspects, choosing the date he'd landed in America as his, '*Open sesame!'*

The handle clicked. The door swung open.

I gawked.

A few thousand dollars, my ass. More like a hundred thousand—maybe more. One thick bundle of cash at a time I unpacked the safe. All hundreds. Ten thousand per bundle. Twenty-six bundles. 260,000 smackeroos.

The money wasn't alone: it had pals, including a short stack of passports from various countries. The names were all different. Dad's face was the only common denominator.

My heart flipped out. My brain short-circuited. Curse words spray painted the bathroom. On the tub's cool porcelain edge, with the passports fanned out in my hands, I selected one. Alessandro Rossi's Italian *passaporto*. It had stamps. Recent stamps. Last January, Dad traveled from LAX to Frankfurt as Rossi. Rossi and Dad returned three days later.

The madness didn't stop there. Dad was a guy who really got around. And he had a gun—a sleek, stub-nosed Glock 17. I knew that because it was in the safe, too.

I wanted to feel indignation and rage that I'd been lied to, but I didn't. Maybe it would come later. Right now all I felt was worried sick. My stomach was churning acid milkshakes that were threatening to melt through the lining.

Who was Dad when he wasn't being Dad? Did Alessandro Rossi have a daughter, and a wife he'd lost to cancer?

I don't know how long I sat there, pondering the previously unthinkable. A while. Maybe longer. When I left the bathroom the sun was still up and there was a starving, gnawing beast stomping around in my belly.

The doorbell rang. On the other side of the door stood a man with an express envelope in his hand. He wished me a good day and jogged back to his truck, before—I presumed—speeding to his next delivery. I tore into the cardboard packet and found my new passport. Reggie Tubbs's gal did good. So what if my photo looked like a Wanted poster? I'd fit right in with the rest of the Family.

This was the rainy day. Whoever the money belonged to—Dad or

Alessandro or Pierre—eight thousand of it was mine now, and it was taking a trip to the bank. I stowed another three thousand in my purse, in case I needed cash.

Then I booked a ticket to Greece. Open-ended.

I locked my parents' house and left Portland behind me, for God knows how long.

Chapter 13

GREECE WAS the same-old when I arrived. Athens turned out to be a sultry old dame with a two-million car a day habit, and it showed.

I caught the KTEL bus at the Liossion station for the paltry price of twenty-seven euros, and three or so hours, all of them spent seated next to a woman who made Grandma look like a bouncy teenager. She prayed to the Virgin Mary the whole way, rocking back and forth in her seat, then knocked everyone else aside with her elbows when the bus wheezed into Volos.

"*Tsiganes* put a curse on me." She pointed to her eye. "Everything I eat …" Her belly let out a bus-rumbling groan and she smacked the driver with her handbag. "Hurry up!" The doors opened and she bolted down the steps. The last I saw of her she was disappearing into the bus terminal, in search of a bathroom.

All those hours I'd been in the splash zone of a potential ecological disaster, thanks to a Romani curse. But I'd survived.

It was a sign. Someone up there was watching out for me.

Detective Melas, the internet told me, lived in what used to be an old firehouse, in a lower middle class neighborhood, in one of the villages on the outskirts of Volos. Suburbs now, if you want to be all technical about it. My father wasn't surprised when he read the city of Volos had gobbled up all the old villages. *They are all the same shit*, Dad always said.

Two stories, narrow figure, lots of brick. What about the pole? My inner child was suddenly voraciously curious about that, as was my inner stripper. The sliding door was still there, but that was the obvious way in. I didn't want obvious—not when there were nosy neighbors about. I sauntered around the side of the house like I was a regular visitor, glancing back when a megaphone crackled, crumbling the silence into serrated pieces. Romani. They were hawking melons out the back of a pickup truck, dusky-skinned women and men who looked tight with Pantone. They were wearing all the colors simultaneously, multilayered, and they wanted twenty cents per kilo for their melons.

For a moment, I considered buying Melas a watermelon.

Nope. Bad idea. What if giving a Greek guy a melon meant we were married or something?

I scooted around back where, lucky for me, there was a back door—a metal slab jammed into the brick. It opened easily after I sweet-talked it with a makeshift lockpick. So maybe I had Googled a thing or two during all that time I'd spent in the bathroom back home. It was always good to learn new things.

Don't think I hadn't struggled with this step toward a life of petty crime. I had. Yeah, I could have plonked myself down on his doorstep and waited like a decent person, but I wanted to snoop. With my family history it could be a gateway crime, and tomorrow I might wake up full-gangster, but those were the risks. I wasn't convinced Nikos Melas was completely kosher.

Inside, my question was answered: Melas had kept the pole.

His place oozed masculinity. The furniture was no-nonsense. Low-key, woodsy colors. No dishwasher. A few photos. Family mostly, by the looks of their features. I dropped my bags, climbed the metal staircase, and found myself in a combination bedroom and office. He had freestanding closets and a desk with an old chair. His laptop was a couple of generations behind, and he didn't use a mouse. Nothing to suggest this was a guy accepting handouts from the mob. I could have booted up his laptop, but that felt icky. I took that as a sign I'd suck at serious crime. The bed was neatly made. It looked comfortable after losing a day between planes and the bus. I kicked off my boots, fluffed his pillow, flopped onto the mattress, and made myself at home. Just for a moment, I promised myself.

I pulled out my phone and tapped until I was back at the Crooked Noses Message Board, perusing the latest Greek mafia news. Cookie's grave had been discovered empty, his boat burned, but of Cookie there was no sign. Dad still hadn't been found. And there was a rumor that Baboulas had killed us both and had her henchmen churn us into sausages and sold to unsuspecting diners in Makria.

BangBang had told everyone to chill, that Baboulas had no reason to kill me or her son. He or she said it with confidence, like they knew.

FarFarAwayGirl shot BangBang a private message. *How do you know Baboulas didn't kill her*?

Just a hunch, BangBang replied.

Didn't sound like a hunch.

There was a long pause. *You want to go digging in this world? Better bring a shovel and a gun.*

I don't want to dig, I lied. *I'm just curious.*

There was nothing after that, and I didn't prod him—or her. The travel finally caught up, slugged me, and my lights blinked off.

Detective Melas was home. He had a gun in one hand, a claw hammer in the other. His mouth was a grim slash and he was wearing a red handprint on his right cheek. He was in uniform, but he'd flicked open the top couple of buttons between the job and here, eager to kick back and relax, obviously.

And here I was, screwing up the zen afternoon he had planned.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I squealed, two seconds after I'd slapped the snot out of him. "Who barges into their own home ready to shoot?"

"The back door was open."

"I didn't shut it? I meant to."

"Well, that changes everything."

Was that sarcasm? I couldn't tell. The adrenaline surge was making things fuzzy. It wanted me to flight or fight, when I'd already spent hours in transit and dimmed my lights further with an impromptu nap.

"Good."

He blinked. "That was sarcasm, you fruit. What the fuck are you doing in my house? Scratch that—what the fuck are you doing in Greece?"

"Really?" Oh yeah, who was sarcastic now? Katerina Makris, that's who. Yeah, I was death-gripping my s. I had a birth certificate and a passport that said it was mine. "That's not blindingly obvious?"

"You better not be doing what I think you're doing."

"What do you think I'm doing?"

"Looking for your father."

"Okay, so I am. No one else is."

He laughed. It was a hard, unforgiving bark. "Is that what you think?"

My eyes narrowed. "What do you know?"

"I know word is they found Cookie's grave empty and his boat burning in the harbor. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"So what? He fakes his death a lot. You told me that."

"His sister filed a missing person report. Said he was supposed to call her when he picked up his car at the cemetery, but he never did call and the car was gone. One of Baby Dimitri's working girls swore she saw Cookie in a car with one of your grandmother's men and a woman who looked just like you."

"Half of Greece looks like me. It's not exactly a positive ID."

"Baby, nobody here looks like you. You're—"

"What?"

The air whooshed out of him. "Going back home," he said.

I put my hands on my hips, chin jutting forward. "Oh yeah? What are you going to do about it?"

The click was barely audible, yet it had all the weight of a cell door slamming. One end of the cuffs was circling my wrist—ooh, shiny!—while the other end was biting into the pole.

He'd cuffed me.

To the pole.

"You're an ass," I yelped.

He rolled his eyes. "Want to know how many times a day I hear that? Comes with the job. I'm immune." He rapped a knuckle on my forehead. "Back soon, baby. Rough day. Long and hard."

"That's what she said," I muttered. He looked at me like I was a nut. Guess they weren't familiar with that joke over here.

My hand slid down to my crossbody bag where I'd stowed my lockpicks. Melas caught on. He relieved me of the bag, dumped it on his bed, then he winked.

"Nice try. You like *moussaka*?"

The animal center of my brain lunged forward. That cardboard meal on the plane was ancient history. And the souvlaki I scoffed down in Lamia. And the snacks I'd brought along for company, just in case I wanted to do some comfort eating.

All of it ancient, crumbling history. This new hunger was real and fierce and *now*.

"Maybe," I said, trying to be cool and failing miserably.

"Be a good girl and you can have some when it's done."

Then he left me there.

My hormones were suddenly my own worst enemy. They liked the cuffs—they liked them a lot. In fact, they were nudging and winking at me, urging me to tell Melas that all three of us should revisit this kinky little scene in his bed over there. It was wrought iron and it looked like it could take a beating.

My hormones were both stupid and blind.

Fortunately, my senses were smarter. They were perfectly aware that in order to keep my arm in its socket I had to lean toward the pole without falling through the giant freakin' hole cut into the floor. I had balancing skills, but I wasn't sure how long I could keep them up.

Downstairs, paper crackled. Plastic screeched. Buttons beeped. Then I heard the unmistakable hum of a microwave oven doing unnatural things to food.

"Are you … microwaving that moussaka?" I called out.

"You got a problem with that? Because if you do, I can eat it all myself."

Even though he couldn't see me, I shook my head. "No, no, that's

fine. Microwaved is good."

Yeah, if you're making popcorn or reheating coffee.

Plates rattled. Cutlery clunked together. I heard the zip-zipping of a serrated knife hacking bread into chunks. The microwave beeped. The aroma of bubbling meat and cheese and béchamel sauce had me food drunk. Zapped or not zapped, I'd go to the plate a willing diner.

I groaned. My stomach growled along in solidarity.

Feed me, Seymour.

Footsteps on the metal stairs. Melas was back, carrying two plates loaded down with moussaka and bread. He set one plate on the dresser, dragged his office chair over to where I was standing, about to pass out from hunger lust. He sat. Began cutting his meal with the food. He broke a wad of bread off the chunk, used it to push steaming meat and sauce onto his fork.

Then the bastard ate it.

I closed my eyes, sank to the floor. "I really hate you."

"This is good," he told me, waving the utensil in my direction. "It's my mother's."

"Home cooking …"

He shoveled more onto his fork. "You cook?"

"Sure, I cook. But not like that. My mom was the serious cook in the family."

"Was?"

"She died."

He nodded, not meeting my eyes. "How did it happen?"

"*Karkinos*." Cancer.

"Sorry. How old were you?"

"Old enough that it didn't screw me up for life, young enough that there's a big gaping hole in my heart and soul," I admitted. "Dad is all I've got. He's always looked out for me—now I have to look out for him."

"He's not all you've got. Blood doesn't turn to water." I gave him a look, so he elucidated. "What about your family here?"

"Ha! Family. My grandmother drugged me, then she had my cousins fly me home."

He laughed, the ass. "I heard."

"And you did nothing? That's kidnapping! Or … or …" My argument petered out. "Or something."

"She was doing you a favor. Doing the right thing. Getting you out of harm's way."

"She's the one who put me in it to begin with when my goon cousins grabbed me." Okay, so they were aiming for Dad. But still.

"She miscalculated."

"What are you, her lawyer?"

"A parent."

Whoa! No way had I seen that coming. "You've got kids?"

"A son. He lives with his mother."

"Divorced?"

"Never married."

"Can I have some of that moussaka?"

"Not yet."

"What would you do if he was missing?"

"Tear the world apart with my hands."

"Exactly," I said. "So why isn't my grandmother doing that?"

"She's a mobster. They're known for not being wired right."

"Please." I rolled my eyes. "Everybody knows family's important to Family. Hey, can I ask you a question?"

"No."

"Why did you tell me Dad's old gang were criminals? They're dentists and school teachers. Not exactly the FBI's Most Wanted."

"You have problems with 'No,' don't you?"

"No."

The phone clipped to his hip buzzed. He glanced at the screen, made a face, stood. "I've got to go."

"Forget something?"

He glanced around. "No." He dropped the plate on his chair, just out of reach, then made a beeline for the stairs.

"Hey," I yelled, panicking. It was inhumane to leave me cuffed to the pole—no food, no water. What if I needed to pee? The urge was already there. I was nearly thirty—*thirty*—and I already knew my bladder wasn't what it used to be. An eighteen-year-old bladder has the capacity of one of those pale blue water towers every rural American town seems to have. At twenty-eight, mine was already down to the size of a small wine cask. By thirty-five I'd be drinking out of a thimble, then cursing myself for overindulging. "What kind of Greek are you? Hospitality is what you do!"

His voice wafted up through the pole hole. "You're half Greek too, honey."

"Don't call me honey."

"Then don't break into my house next time. Wait outside like a good girl."

The back door slammed. I heard the snick of the lock I'd picked earlier.

I closed my eyes. God, his mother's moussaka smelled good. How the hell was I going to get out of this pickle?

I looked down, through to what was a loft-type set up, now that the Melas's home wasn't housing firetrucks. Eyes closed again, I tried to recall the layout. I shuffled around the pole, gawking at the great

expanse of nothing much below. There was furniture, but none of it was in arm's reach, even if I slid down. I'd just be stuck down there, equally hungry, even further away from the food.

The chair. Maybe I could reach that. I laid down on the floor, wiggled backwards until the cuffs threatened to tear off my arm. My shoulder socket was making all kinds of protests, but I knew if push came to shove, it would give up my arm just like that. My body was no match for metal. I glanced back at the chair with the plate of sweet mana sitting on its seat, waiting on some nice, considerate person like me to come along and chow it down. Maybe if I wiggled my foot I could hook one of the legs.

Nope.

Splat! That was the sound of me flopping facedown on the floor.

Detective Melas had somehow calculated the precise distance from the pole to the chair, adding an inch or so for good luck. His good luck—mine was all bad. There was no physical way I could reach that chair, and I was pretty sure I was fresh out of telekinesis and other woo-woo talents.

I was, to put it bluntly, screwed. And not in a good way.

What I needed was that moussaka, and I needed it now. I could die of starvation, cuffed to the pole. Obviously Melas hadn't thought that one through. How would it look? *Volos Policeman Found with Mobster's Dead Granddaughter*.

Bad. Very bad.

Grandma would flip. She sent me away, yeah, but not so some cop could kill me slowly, through cruelty and neglect. Probably he'd wake up with a whole dead horse in his bed.

If only I could call someone—someone with a hacksaw or a key.

A light popped on in my head, small but intrusive like the dreaded Check Engine light. I had a phone, didn't I? Right now it was wedged between my hip and the floor, which explained the bone-deep ache.

But who could I call?

Grandma? *Fuggedaboudit*. She'd export me ASAP.

Takis and Stavros were out of the question. They had their lips surgically attached to my grandmother's butt—especially Takis.

Xander? I'd never live it down. He and Melas both got their kicks out of torturing me, so he'd be on Team Melas for this war.

Which left Aunt Rita.

Now that I thought about it, that wasn't such a bad idea. She was a mobster's kid, so I was confident she was in possession of skills that veered into shady territory.

She picked up on three. "*Ela*."

That's the way most Greeks answer the phone. No "Hi" or "Hello" for them. They go with "Come."

"Aunt Rita?"

"Katerina?"

"The one and only," I said. "I need some help."

There was a long pause, filled with the whoosh of a smallish tornado. She was doing her nails. "Anything, my love, unless you need help coming back to Greece. Mama would kill me if I helped you back into the country—and that's not a figure of speech."

Didn't I know it? "Too late," I said cheerfully. "I'm handcuffed to a pole in Detective Melas's house."

She sucked in her breath. "*Oh-la-la*, that delicious cop has a pole in his house? Wait—what are you doing in his house?" Her voice rose an octave. "What are you doing in Greece?"

I winced as her voice went falsetto. "Do I really have to tell you?"

"No," she muttered. "I guess I know. How did you wind up on the pole?"

On the pole, like this was a career move.

"Could be I broke into his house."

She laughed. "He wasn't happy about that, eh?"

"Not at first. But then I think he kind of liked it—after he cuffed me and ate moussaka in front of me."

"He ate in front of you without giving you food?" She was horrified. "What kind of Greek is he? I can kill him if you want. Or we can have someone else do it."

"No, no," I said quickly. "I just need out of these cuffs. Can you help me, please?"

She asked for his address, so I reeled off the details from the phone, then I got down to the serious business of waiting.

Gunshot jerked me out of my daydream. Metal blasting metal.

Oh my God, somebody was breaking into Melas's house, and I was stuck to the stupid pole. Because of him, I was going to die at the hands of a crazed gunman.

Despite not being overly religious, I crossed myself Greek-style and begged for an intervention. I'm one of those lousy Christians, one of people who only remember God when I need something. When Mom was dying I almost talked His ear off, but he tuned me out and let her die anyway, because he was busy catapulting Kardashians into the spotlight. I guess mankind really did something to piss Him off.

Anyway, I needed Him again.

Downstairs, the back door burst open.

"Katerina?"

Aunt Rita. Relief washed over me. My knees went spongey.

Never mind, God. As You were.

"Up here!"

A moment later, she appeared at the top of the stairs. She was a sight in knee high boots, pink fishnets, and a skirt that used to be somebody's belt. No wig today; her hair was her own: buzz cut, dark brown. A Greek Grace Jones. Her top half—between head and waist—was hiding behind a huge gun. I didn't know what kind—I was gun illiterate—but I knew it could spit bullets and kill a lot of people in a very short amount of time.

Or it could open a metal door—fast.

"I kind of love you right now," I said. Then I looked from the cannon she was toting to my manacled wrist. "You're not going to shoot these off, are you?"

She shrugged. "I don't know how to pick a lock."

What kind of mobster couldn't pick a lock? Even I could do it with the aid of the internet, and I'd never committed a crime.

Well, I'd never committed a crime before Greece.

I nodded to my bag, told her I could do it if she gave me my bag.

Bag in hand, I rifled around, hunting for my lock picks. Predictably, the way of all women's bags, they'd sunk to the bottom. One of those laws of the universe that—so far—no one has attempted to explain. Picks finally in hand, I began Googling my way out of the cuffs. Everything is on the internet if you know where to look.

Aunt Rita was eyeing the food still sitting on the chair and on the bed. "What happened to this moussaka?"

"Microwave."

She poked at it with the pointy end of the gun. "And he calls us criminals."

"He's a monster." Okay, so I broke into his house, but he'd started the war by cuffing me to a pole then leaving food almost within reach.

Payback was going to be vicious.

"You know what would be funny?" Aunt Rita moved from the food to Melas's dresser. When I looked up from the cuffs she had a pair of his boxer briefs in her hand. "Trophy," she said.

"Stealing underwear? That sounds like something Takis and Stavros would do."

"Ick. You're right." She dropped her prize on the bed, peppered it with a few holes. When we recovered from the noise she said, "What would be funny is if we made a fire and burned his house down."

Uh … "That's a bit drastic."

"He cuffed you to a pole. You want the police to think they can push you around? If they disrespect you now, it could be a problem later."

I looked at the underwear and the unfortunate mattress. "I think

he'll get the message."

"Hmm," she said. "I guess it's an overreaction. It's the estrogen pills. They make me bitchy."

A second later, the lock clicked and the cuffs popped open. I held up my hands in victory, Rocky Balboa-style, then I stuffed Melas's shiny bracelets into my bag. Finders, keepers.

In the end we left the house in one piece, although I couldn't stop my aunt firing a few dozen rounds into the microwave.

"Let him eat cold leftovers," she said.

I didn't argue. Also, I didn't leave the moussaka behind. I grabbed the fork, the plate, and we left.

Aunt Rita had come charging to my rescue in her pink convertible. The top was down, the radio was blaring, keys swinging from the ignition. She threw my bags into the trunk.

I leaped into the passenger seat, wishing I had a convertible. My Jeep was nice, but this was pink.

My sense of direction wasn't stellar, especially in a new country, but I was pretty sure we were going the wrong way.

"Isn't Volos back there?"

"I can't just take you to Mama's place."

"Oh," I said. "I guess not. So where are we going?"

"A little place I keep."

"For?"

"Nieces who aren't supposed to be in the country."

Fair enough. "What's everyone saying about me? Did Grandma tell them she sent me home?"

"Mama told them nothing. Only Takis and Stavros know you went back to America. Everyone else has their own ideas."

"Like what?"

She shrugged one cheetah-print shoulder. "That Mama had you killed. That Xander locked you away as his mistress. That you look down on the family, so you left on your own. That the Baptist got you."

Sadly, that all sounded reasonable with a family like mine. Then my eye twitched. "Wait—they think I'm Xander's mistress?"

"Only the stupid ones."

"Stupid?"

"I know his mistress, and it's not you."

"Who is she?"

"Nobody. His hand."

A laugh kicked its way out of my throat. "Is he a monk?"

"Close." She shook her head. "A man like that? If he's single it's a crime. He's a god."

"He kind of is," I agreed. "So no women, like, ever?"

"Not that I've heard about—and I hear everything. People who are too scared to talk to Mama, they come to me and I go to Mama."

"Maybe he's a virgin," I said.

"I remember when I was a virgin," she said wistfully. "In those days we used to do anal instead."

I blinked. I was pretty sure that was one way to squash virginity, but who was I to argue with the country that probably invented butt sex?

"If everyone thinks I'm gone, then maybe the Baptist thinks I'm gone, too. That's good—right?"

"He could be transatlantic. Probably he's standing on your front doorstep in Portland right now."

Probably. And I bet he had a latte. "Why is he hunting me? I didn't do anything."

"Maybe somebody paid him. Or maybe it's one of those pro bono things."

I wasn't sure which was worse: that idea that someone wanted me dead badly enough to hire a hitman, or that a hitman hated me enough to kill me in his own time, for funsies.

What would Grandma do if he was hunting her?

Probably something proactive.

I should do that. Be proactive.

Too bad I felt like digging a hole, burying myself inside until this all blew over and Dad was back home, where he belonged. Where we belonged.

"Who is he?"

"The Baptist?" She shrugged. "Who knows? There are rumors about his identity. But you are the only living person I know who has admitted to seeing his face."

Something clicked in my head. Pieces locked into place. My life had become such a shitstorm circus since Dad was kidnapped that the merely weird had no choice but to bounce off me like a rubber ball.

And it *was* weird that Detective Melas knew I'd gotten a good look at the Baptist, yet he never asked me to mosey on down to the precinct house, or police station, or whatever they called it here, to flip through mugshots or describe the guy to a police artist.

Which meant he knew the Baptist's identity.

Chapter 14

AUNT RITA'S idea of a safe house was what is known as a crack house back home. I had decided not to point out the similarity, figuring something would get lost in translation, when she said, "I scored it in a card game. The former owner was a Russian *sisa* dealer."

"Sisa?"

"Greek meth. The cocaine of the poor, they call it."

"I didn't realize Greece had a meth problem."

"Oh yes," she said. "Greece has all the problems."

The house was a small square cakebox. It used to be white all over, but now it was bare stone with chronic dandruff. Tufts of grass sprouted from the rocky earth, but had given up when they realized the trees were hogging all the sunlight. The porch was crooked (kind of like my family), the patio had cracked and was bleeding weeds, and there was a stone basin with a red hand pump slightly to the left of center.

"No running water?"

Aunt Rita nodded to the pump. "Yes, but you have to chase it."

Not quite what I meant. "Toilet?"

"Outhouse. It's not so bad."

"How do you stand it?"

She scratched her nose with one glossy red nail. "Must be the leftover testosterone."

That probably did it. Men never seemed to care much where they pooped.

"Inside is nicer," she said.

Not that I doubted the veracity of her words, but I didn't believe her.

We were on the edge of nowhere, which turned out to be not too far from Agria. The house was hidden by scores of olive trees, fighting dirty in their battle to see the sun. They'd brought jagged branches, and by the looks of things they knew how to use them—albeit slowly. The ground was sticks and stones, things that were known for breaking bones. Somewhere nearby there were goats. The jangling of their bells and their happy bleats were a giveaway.

My phone rang.

"Hello?" I still did it American-style, with an actual greeting instead of a demand.

"What happened to my bed and microwave?"

Melas.

"I didn't do it."

"Somebody did it. You know who?"

"Um," I said vaguely. "I think I have jet lag-induced amnesia."

"Doesn't exist."

"Google it." I hung up.

Two minutes later it rang again. "Like I said: Doesn't exist."

"What do you want, Melas?"

"I want to know which one of your crazy family members shot up my place so I know where to send the bill."

I sighed hard enough to strain something. "Send it to me."

"What about my cuffs?"

"Keeping them. Never know when I might want to cuff someone."

"That a threat or a promise?"

Because I was still cobbling together a plan, I didn't mention the Baptist. When I came out it was going to be swinging. Melas was going to lose an eye, or maybe just some of his dignity. I wanted to be the kind of surprise he never saw coming.

"You'll never know."

I hung up. Technically I ended the call, but hanging up sounds much more dramatic and final.

My aunt was in the bedroom, blinking into the mirror. Its edges had lost paint, and there were remnants of white powder in places. There was a bed in the corner, a double with a cheap metal frame. The room was otherwise deserted.

"Ever hear of Latisse? I'm thinking of getting some. Supposed to be a drug for glaucoma, but all these people slowly going blind grew crazy long, thick lashes, so now it's a beauty product. I could use crazy long, thick lashes. Falsies look like caterpillars crawled onto my eyelids and died."

I leaned against the jamb. "Sounds like Thalidomide. First they gave it to pregnant women for nausea, until they realized it was a teratogen. Now it's a cancer drug."

"I swear, every time you pop an aspirin it's a lottery."

I held up my phone. "Melas called. He wanted to know who shot up his bed and microwave."

"You tell him?"

"Not in this lifetime. What do you know about him?"

"Detective Melas? He's from Makria. His family still lives there. Wishes he could make history by eliminating organized crime. Never going to happen. People are always going to want what the good guys can't give them, and he knows it."

That sounded like people. As a kid I always wanted what my folks weren't dishing up for dinner. Fast food wasn't illegal, but turned out

there was a good reason it was a banned substance at our kitchen table.

"So he's against the Family?"

"Yes and no. I don't think he knows. Mama has done good things for his family and for Makria. Now he's a policeman and he wants to uphold the law, but … Greeks remember. We're like elephants, except when we want to forget something. Then we're more like goldfish."

"Huh," I said. "Where exactly does he work?"

"Why?"

I held up the empty plate. "Plate."

"Keep the plate."

"I think it's his mother's."

She shuddered, then she ponied up the directions. I filed it away in the box in my head marked Dangerous Plans.

After a brief, horrifying tour, my aunt threw me a key.

"House key?" I figured this place was its own security system. No one in their right mind would raid the house for valuables.

"Scooter. It's in the shed out back." She kissed me on both cheeks. "Careful, my love. Mama has eyes everywhere."

After an hour or two wrestling with the kapok-stuffed mattress, I felt ready to take on the world, provided the world could be easily conquered with baseless threats and very little effort on my part. I pumped a bucket of water to take to the outhouse. And when I was done weeping over the state of Greek plumbing, I washed up with cold, sweet spring water and went to check out the scooter. Like my aunt's car it was a violent shade of pink and came with a matching helmet. I felt like Barbie as I fired it up and navigated the bumps until I hit road.

Destination: Volos. The plan was to hurl rocks at Detective Melas's head.

The Volos Police Department was housed in a nice steel and glass behemoth downtown. Detective Nikos Melas didn't work there. He belonged to an offshoot that dealt with crime up in Mount Pelion's villages. The digs were less fancy. A single layer of hastily cobbled-together brick, with a few windows plugging the holes. Three steps connected the front doors to the sidewalk, not a ramp in sight. This wasn't a building that coddled anyone. Those who couldn't walk simply had to avoid crime, or die trying.

I trudged through the wall of heat only to fall face first into a humid sweat pool. Greece's austerity measures meant these cops didn't get air conditioning. The police building reeked of despair, aggravation, and cheap-o coffee. The windows were open, the breeze non-existent. Someone had propped the front doors open with a couple of bricks. Guess nobody was worried they'd left potential weapons on their front doorstep.

Inside, they'd spared every expense. The desks were metal, the chairs flimsy, and the computers …

Okay, computer. They had one. But it was a dinosaur from the mid-2000s. Push down hard enough on the keyboard and it would shoot crude.

The cop behind the reception desk was barely out of high school. He was sporting a crop of fresh pimples and baby fuzz. I asked for Melas, and he asked me what I wanted, and I said, "Just get Detective Melas." Then I felt bad, so I tacked on a rushed "Please."

"Wait there."

He pointed to a bench against the wall. It looked like one of those prisoner benches I'd only ever seen on TV. Wood slats and a bar that ran along the front, perfect for cuffing the guilty—and probably the innocent—while the cops chugged coffee and *loukoumades* (donut holes soaked in syrup) and bitched about paperwork.

One woman sat there alone, her expression set to bored. She looked like she was bored a lot—maybe even professionally. Her cheekbones were high and sharp enough to slice hard cheese. Her hair was butter blonde, its black roots leaving no doubts about its authenticity. She wore jelly sandals, a denim skirt that showed a mile of dimpled leg, and a top with all the stretch torn out. Could be she was in the wrong place, because these guys didn't look like the fashion police.

Her chin jutted out as I plonked myself down on the bench. She let her peripheral vision do all the staring.

"*Kalispera*," I said politely, wishing her a good afternoon, because I was trying to make amends with the universe for barking at the itty, bitty baby cop. I didn't nod to her cuffs. As a recently cuffed person myself, it seemed rude. "How are you?"

She answered in a Slavic drawl. "Terrible. This is the worst day ever since my last worst day ever."

"Why?"

"I sell drugs. They caught me."

"Really? I've never met a drug dealer before."

"Congratulations. Now you have met one."

"What kind of drugs?" It was a question more suited to an alleyway or a smokey corner at a party, but I was working with what we had. It

never hurt to be polite, unless the other party didn't know or care about good manners.

"Medicine. Pills. Drugs for classy addicts."

"My family's kind of in drugs, too," I told her, searching for common ground. "But I think they have people who sell for them. I don't think they do classy drugs, though. Just regular drugs."

"Who is your family?"

I told her. "Do you know them?"

"Everybody knows them," she said. "What do you do?"

"Debt collector."

"Is good money?"

I thought about how my workplace burned to the ground. "Not anymore."

The bench shook as she changed position. "What you do here?"

"Came to bust a corrupt cop."

Could have been respect I saw in her eyes, could have been allergies. "Bad weather can get better; bad man—never. What he do?"

"More like what didn't he do."

"Before you tell me you debt collector, I would have guess maybe he didn't pay you for sex."

Yikes. Had past twenty-four hours tap-danced on my face that hard?

"He did cuff me to a pole," I admitted. "But there wasn't any sex. He just ate moussaka in front of me while I watched."

She nodded like she knew. "That is a fetish, you know. People pay good money. You should tell him that. Ask him for money or make him gets kicks somewhere else."

Seemed pointless to explain it wasn't like that. Anyway, here was Melas, big shit-eating grin on his face, until he spotted me wasting the afternoon on his police bench.

"Good," he said. "You can pay for what you did to my bed and microwave right now."

I pulled out my trump card, my 'Gotcha.' It was early in the game but he had swung first and I had face to save. Also, I was operating this mouth with a shortage of sleep and an overabundance of indignation.

"I'll pay for your bed as soon as you tell me why you didn't ask me to describe the Baptist. It occurs to me now that maybe you already know who he is, you … you … dirty cop!"

I said it big, said it loud. Said it Greek, basically. I even planted my hands on my hips so they'd know I meant business.

And guess what?

Nobody gave a damn.

They kept on doing what they were doing—eating, drinking,

grudgingly scratching info on paperwork—without a single blip in their cop radars.

"Huh," I said, puzzled. "That didn't go the way I planned."

Melas looked at me. "How did you plan it?"

"More indignation on your part. Maybe some crying. Lots of time in interrogation for you, followed by a few years in a damp, chilly cell."

"You aim too high."

A big cop ambled over, keys in hand. He had ham hock hands and a white stain on his shirt. Given that he also reeked of garlic, I was guessing *tzatziki*.

"Come on, Penka," he said to my new friend.

My stomach growled. Three sets of eyes swiveled my way.

I nodded to the human barrel unlocking Penka's cuffs. "The yogurt sauce on his shirt made me hungry."

"Great timing," Melas said. "You can buy me dinner. You shot up my microwave."

"Wasn't me," I told him truthfully.

His buddy rolled the dealer away. She seemed personable enough. Hopefully they'd go easy on her, and she'd be back on her stoop or wherever soon, peddling pills to insomniacs and the jittery.

Melas steered me through the open double doors. His hand was clamped around my upper arm, and I was hoping he didn't drive a car the way he was driving me. Just saying. I almost tripped down the steps, and at one point he came *this* close to walking me into a parked car. Guess Greek cops didn't know about serving and protecting. He marched me three blocks down, shoved me into a souvlaki shop where it was standing room only in one of Hades' smaller closets. So many bodies squeezed in there it could have been a mosh pit, if not for the sharp bark of "Come!" every thirty seconds as the souvlaki guy beckoned the next starving customer, and the mouthwatering aroma of sizzling onions and meat.

The crowd moved swiftly, and soon it was our turn. Melas ordered; I paid. That didn't seem fair, but when I complained about it (hey, if I'm paying, I should be able to order for myself), he said, "A lot of women would love to buy me souvlaki," totally missing my point.

Was that a metaphor, or did women just wanted to feed the guy?

When our food was up he grabbed both paper-wrapped rolls and skedaddled, leaving me to carry the drinks.

Lucky for Melas, and lucky for me, he didn't go far. He commandeered a patch of shade from a couple of teenagers who had been using the sheltered wall to draw pretty pictures with a magic marker. He leaned his back flat against the FACK, leaving me to admire the picture of what seemed to be a deity violating a donkey.

"Zeus?" I asked.

He looked. "The Prime Minister."

Showed how little I knew about Greek politics.

Melas swapped a souvlaki for a drink. Even trade. The lemonade was sweet, lemony, and nothing like any lemonade I'd ever tasted in my life. Heaven in a glass bottle.

"The Epsa factory sits on top of a spring," Melas told me. "That's what they use to make the drinks."

Interesting, but I hoped a biography of the meat wasn't next. As far as I was concerned, meat comes from a supermarket.

I went from bottle to souvlaki, peeling back the paper before sinking my teeth into the top. Flavor exploded in my mouth, a perfect storm of pita bread, lamb, tangy onions, sweet tomatoes, and a swirl of *tzaztiki* and feta.

"Oh my God," I said, violating Mom's Number One rule at the dinner table. I figured she'd forgive me, given that there wasn't a table in sight, and also because it's hard to enforce rules when you're dead. In a foreign country it felt slightly decadent and exotic to talk with my mouth full.

We ate in silence until I couldn't take it any more. Mouth still stuffed, I said, "You know who he is, don't you? the Baptist, I mean."

He shrugged and kept on chewing. Probably his mother had the same rule about talking and eating. Given that she was still living, and Greek, she'd probably magically know if he scribbled in her rulebook, and turn his life into a living hell.

Eventually the food ran out. He drained his bottle, leaving him with no choice but to answer my question. "I know who he is."

"Who?"

"It's a 'need to know thing'. You don't need to know. What you need is to go home."

"Tried that. Didn't like it." I folded my arms, planted myself in front of him. The donkey lover was inches from his right ear.

He groaned. "You're a pain in my ass."

"Pegging's not really my style."

He looked confused, so I explained it to him, using the politician and his donkey as reference material. Confusion turned to fear. "There's something wrong with you," he said. "Go away."

Wheels turned in my head. Nerve cells flung neurotransmitters across my synapses. I did the math and came up with an awful number.

"Is he a cop?"

Twitch. "No."

I stabbed the air with a finger. "Liar. He is too a cop. Not just any cop—he's one of yours."

"No, he's not."

"Yes, he is."

"Not."

This was turning kindergarten, fast. "Okay," I conceded. "Let me extrapolate further. the Baptist is a *former* cop. He *used* to be one of yours."

Silence. His jaw ticked.

"He's a former cop," I repeated. Dread blossomed inside my chest, elbowing my heart and lungs to the side so it had room to expand. "Shit." I might have grabbed my hair and paced a bit. When I stopped I said, "The people he kills, they're *all* bad guys, aren't they? None of them are contracts. They're his own personal hit list. He thinks he's taking out the trash."

He shrugged, but it was the kind of shrug that was intended to be a nod.

It's easy to fall into the sort of magical thinking where you're the good guy, and where the other guy—the one hellbent on detaching your head from its body—is the bad guy. I'd been one of the good guys all my life. Never got a parking ticket, a speeding ticket, a library fine. My record was a blank, squeaky clean page. Then along came Greece. Hellas was all out of paper in its outhouse, so it had wiped its butt on me. By default, because I was a Makris, I was part of the criminal class, one of the bad guys. There's no being good around here when your family name is bad—Dad was adamant about that. Steal one chicken, the entire line is contaminated for centuries. As far as the Baptist and people like him were concerned, I was a ticking bomb. I could go full supervillain at any moment. I was Tony Soprano waiting to happen. For all they knew I was a Michael Corleone; he started out as one of the good guys, too.

The Baptist was just taking protective measures.

Something mewled. I suspected it was me.

"Why did you tell me Grandma hired him to kill Cookie?"

"I didn't. I told you that was the story going around."

"Was it really?"

"There's always a story. That was one—just not one of ours. Go home," Melas said. "There you can have a life. Here you'll always be watching your back, waiting on a bullet to come out of nowhere."

Gulp.

Ordinarily I'd have gone like a good little sheep, but Dad was still out there. Until he turned up there was no backing down. If a bullet—or the Baptist—found me before then at least I'd die honorably, doing what mattered most.

"Is there another way off the naughty list?"

He shook his head.

"Then I'll take my chances. Dad's worth it."

"He'd be the first one to send you home."

"How would you know? You know nothing about him—or me."

"I'm a father, remember? I'd be furious if I was him. A parent is supposed to lie their life down for a child."

"Yeah, well, I'm not every child. I'm doing this my way. Are you going to help me or what?"

"Forget it."

"Give me something. Anything. A picture so I can ask around."

"You want to find him?"

"Not really." Maybe I was nuts, but I wasn't crazy. "I need to talk to him, though. Reason with him. Maybe he'll leave me alone."

He tilted his head back and laughed. "Baby, he's not somebody you bargain with. He's a psycho. He'll listen and then he'll kill you."

I stood there for a moment, hands on hips, squinting through the doily that was my plan. "Okay, so I haven't thought this whole plan through yet."

"The plan is: go home and leave it to the police."

"Because that's working out *so* well."

"I'm not helping you find him. So don't ask."

"How about his real name?"

His eyes dropped to my chest. When they came back to my face they were all warm and gooey. "You look good. Do you know how irresistible you are? You make me wish I wasn't a cop, or that you weren't a Makris."

My heart kicked itself in the butt, sped up to a moderate jog. Lust shot me with an arrow, right in the v-spot.

"I'm immune to rotten bastards."

"I liked seeing you in my handcuffs," he said, deep and low. "Ever let a man tie you up before?"

"You're a pig." My mouth was dry. I wanted him to keep talking, and I wanted him to shut the hell up. First world problems.

Somehow we'd switched places. Now my back was against the wall and Melas was dangerously close.

"Oink," he said. He slid one hand behind my neck, fitting his hand to the smooth curve. Then he kissed me.

I've been kissed plenty, but that kiss? Magic. I was glad the wall was there to catch me when he deepened the kiss and my knees began to wobble. Down in my underwear a party was starting. The world desaturated around us. Only Melas and I were in bold, bright colors, and I was no longer sure if we were one object or two.

He pulled away a split second before I curled a leg around him and embarrassed myself by dry humping a man in public.

"Go home," he said.

"Go fuck yourself."

He looked me up and down, grinned. "Maybe later." Then the smile died as the gravity of the situation swallowed him up. "You need a ride?"

I wasn't sure if he meant the kind with wheels or bed springs. Truth is I needed both, but for decency's sake I went with wheels. "I've got a vehicle."

"Stolen?"

"Borrowed."

"Borrowed, borrowed or stolen, borrowed?"

"The first one," I said.

"Where'd you park? I'll walk you back."

Yeah, right. He wanted to run the tags, see if I was telling the truth. To be honest, I was kind of curious what they'd turn up if he did.

"It's more scooter, less car."

We rounded the corner, to where I'd parked my aunt's scooter on the sidewalk.

"And it's pink," he said. "Something smells like …" He glanced around, looking for the dog.

The dog was long gone. "Poop," I said. "It smells like poop."

Together we looked for the source.

After a moment, Melas started to laugh. "You're not going to like this."

My eyes followed the path his had already burned, all the way to my borrowed helmet. It was still Barbie pink, but now the inside was brown. There was no way my head was going in there. For one thing, it wouldn't fit.

"Jesus," I said, nose clamped between my fingers. "Must have been a big dog."

"Several dogs, I'd say."

"Maybe not even dogs."

I considered the options. Dog, human, or bear, that thing had to die. Preferably in a bonfire. I picked it up by one strap, dumped it in Melas's arms.

"Can you get rid of this?"

He recoiled in horror. "You can't ride that thing without a helmet."

I swung my leg over, started the engine. "Of course I can."

"It's illegal. I'll have to give you a ticket."

In an increasingly shitty mood, I gave the gas all the hell I could muster, then kicked off. "You'll have to catch me first."

Certain of my victory, I fist-pumped the air.

He caught up to me three blocks away, scribbled a ticket, stuck it to my forehead when he was done.

"That's what you get," he told me, before speeding away in his cop car.

I was going places. In circles, mostly. I couldn't remember exactly where my aunt had stashed her safe house, so I called her. It was that or get lost in the olive grove. The Mount Pelion region was a jungle of olive trees; pinpointing her slice was nigh on impossible.

"Sorry about your helmet," I said when she showed up in the pink convertible. Along the way she'd picked up a wig. Stick straight. Blunt bangs. Looked like it had been dyed by Heinz.

"What happened?"

I told her. Instead of laughing, her face grew increasingly grim. It was late afternoon and she had a five o'clock shadow sprouting up under her foundation.

"It's that *mouni*."

What was her name again—Dad's ex. "Dina?"

"When your father first ran away she did that all the time. *Kaka* in our cars, *kaka* in the mailbox. I don't know where she got it all from. She must have been collecting donations."

Bile lurched up my esophagus. I kicked it back down with a big gulp. "I guess she really missed Dad."

She scoffed at that. "Before your father, her *mouni* was like a train station. Men came, men went. She let them ride the choo-choo for free. She didn't find chastity until she met Michail. Now she's a born-again virgin."

"So you think she did this?"

"Who else? She knows the scooter. She must have mistaken you for me."

The list of people I knew in Greece was short. The list of fecal freaks I knew in Greece—or anywhere on earth—was even shorter.

"Let's go see her," I said.

We jumped into the Peptomobile. Somewhere along the beach I recognized one of the Family's fleet of cars behind us.

"Do you know we're being followed?"

"Yes."

"Is it Takis and Stavros?"

"Yes."

"So does Grandma know I'm back?"

"Yes."

"How?"

She tapped a manicured fingernail on her temple. "Mama is like God. She knows everything. If there is something she doesn't know,

she beats it out of the person who does know."

"She doesn't know where Dad is."

"She's beating a lot of people lately."

Well, that was both proactive and disturbing. "I thought she wasn't doing anything."

"She had us clean up the dungeon, just in case."

"We have a dungeon?"

"Under the tennis court out back."

Strange place to put a dungeon, but what did I know? My experience with dungeons was limited to one date—a date that, up until that point—had shown promise. Rod Fisher had his own hair, a job, and he didn't live in his parents' basement. These days, dating a guy under thirty was risky. There were a lot of closet basement dwellers out there. They'd walk you through the back door, take the staircase leading down instead of staying on the first floor, where the living room should be. Rod seemed aboveboard until he said, "Wanna come see where the fun happens?"

Fun was good, so the three screwdrivers I'd consumed said, "Yes."

He walked me down to a fully stocked sex dungeon—not that I'd ever been in one, but hey, you *see* things when you spend enough time on the internet. Once I saw a guy do things with a liter-sized bottle of Sprite that didn't seem like they'd be physically possible. It's amazing what you can achieve with the American can-do spirit and a tub of coconut oil.

But a bonafide dungeon for prisoners and torture? Nope, I had never seen one outside of a movie. And I hoped I never would.

"Yikes," I said.

"Don't worry, it's only other bad people who end up in there. Mama has rules and standards. No women, unless they are criminals. No children. No civilians. Only the bad guys."

I thought about the Baptist and how he was a former cop. "You kind of are the bad guys." Did I say *kind of*? I meant *totally*.

"There are levels."

"Sounds like a video game."

"Sometimes it feels that way."

We parked at the open end of Dina's street and hoofed it up to her cakebox home. No sign of her in the front yard. Maybe she was still hiding behind her locked door.

Aunt Rita folded her arms on the top of the gate. "Dina!" After a lengthy pause she hollered the woman's name again.

Nothing.

"Come," she said, and pushed through the gate. The front door was unlocked, but my aunt told me that was nothing unusual around here. Nobody ever broke into anyone's house.

"Aren't we breaking in?"

"The door was unlocked."

Her circular logic made a deranged kind of sense, so I followed her inside.

Dina's house didn't want sane visitors, and it said so with an overabundance of red paint, yards of white lace, and photographs of Dad. A vaguely familiar perfume haunted the shadows, and below that, the smell of an unflushed toilet.

I sniffed and wished I hadn't. "What is that?"

She stopped rummaging through Dina's mail to inhale. "Love's Baby Soft."

"They still make that?"

"That or she hoarded."

Aunt Rita vanished into the living room. I lingered in the hall, where Dad was all over the walls. Pictures from the old days, before he became uncool, the way all parents do. This was a Dad I didn't know. A motorcycle-riding Dad with acid-wash jeans and a fauxhawk. Dad with a mullet. Dad with his arm around Dina, his attention on something beyond the camera's scope.

My father was a great guy—I loved him more than anything in the world—but this was too much of a good thing. Dina's place was a shrine to his awesomeness. She even had a room dedicated entirely to Dad, including a crocheted doll with brown button eyes. It was sitting on her pillow.

"Look at this," Aunt Rita called out.

I wandered into the living room. The couches were plastic-covered. The pictures were iconic. Lots of gold, lots of saints with Dad's face. Draped across the coffee table was a rectangular tablecloth embroidered with his name. She'd bunched it up in the middle, holding it in place with vase so that a triangle of wood was visible. It looked neat and intentional.

My aunt sniffed. "Everybody does that here with tablecloths. I don't know why—I only know we do it. I do it, too."

I pointed out the embroidery. "I guess she was serious about Dad."

"He must have a magic penis."

Ugh. There are some things you just don't want to hear, you know? I trotted to the kitchen, opened the swinging door. Galley-shaped. Floors and counters clean enough to eat off. On the counter was a tray of tulle wedding favors.

I gagged. My hand shot up to cover my nose. I backed up—fast—smashing into Aunt Rita.

"My Virgin Mary, what is that?"

Crap, and lots of it. And it said something about my aunt—I wasn't sure I wanted to know what—that she wrinkled her nose and made a

disgusted face instead of shielding her nose.

"Dina made special *bonbonieres*," I said.

"Jesus. Who does that?"

"Dina, apparently."

"That woman's got big problems in her head. Speaking of Dina, she's not here—dead or alive. Come on. Let's sit outside and wait for her. If her house wasn't filled with *kaka* we could hide in the shadows and scare her when she comes home."

We traipsed back outside to the barren yard. Before we had a chance to get comfortable, a face came at us over the fence. The old man had Dumbo's ears, a nose that could open cans, and eye whites the color of lemons. Looked like his liver had retired to one of the islands without forwarding the address to the rest of him.

"You looking for Dina?" he asked.

"Maybe," Aunt Rita said. "Have you seen her?"

"Earlier she was here."

"When was that?" I asked.

"Before she went out."

My aunt leaned over, muttered, "This is like pulling toenails, but with less screaming."

I shuddered. "When did she go?"

He took his sweet time deciding on an answer. "Before you came. What do you want with her?"

"She won something," I said.

"What did she win?"

Think fast, Kat. "A year's supply of bread."

He pondered that for a moment. "That's a good thing to win."

Didn't I know it? Greek bread was amazing. Hot, fresh, none of those preservatives nobody can pronounce. "It is pretty good," I admitted.

He sucked air through his teeth. "What happens if she doesn't claim her prize?"

"Why wouldn't she? Who wouldn't want a year of bread?"

"Somebody on a low-carb diet," my aunt said. She had a point.

"I could use a year of bread," the neighbor said. "The pension isn't what it used to be."

"Non-transferable," Aunt Rita said.

He scratched behind his ear, creating a blizzard of dry, dead skin. "Could be she's be dead."

We both looked at him.

"How do you figure?" I asked.

The old man shrugged. "That's what happens on the TV. People come around, wanting to give somebody a prize, but then it turns out that person is dead or kidnapped."

"Did Dina look dead or kidnapped?"

"No. She looked angry. But that's how she always looks."

Aunt Rita nodded. "That's Dina all right. Anything else you can tell us?"

"She sings a lot," he went on. "Always Jenny Vanou songs."

I looked at my aunt. I wasn't up-to-date on Greek singers.

She clued me in. "Sad, dramatic songs."

"Like torch songs?"

She nodded. "But without the fire."

"Sometimes there was fire," the neighbor said. "She was always burning effigies. But she was a good neighbor. She never stole firewood and she kept the *tsiganes* away."

Tsiganes. *Yiftes*. Gypsies. Roma. Romanies. Greece had a Roma problem. Or—depending on who you asked—the Roma had a Greek problem. For years, the government had been trying to integrate the two people, but both parties had long memories and the ability to pass on a grudge through their DNA. Greeks remembered when Romanies used to come knocking on their front doors, begging for money, and the Romanies remembered when the Greeks gave them rude hand signals and threatened to beat them with brooms. Nothing short of a memory wipe was going to smoosh them into one happy patty anytime soon.

"How did she do that?" I asked.

"By being creepier than they are," he said.

Romanies didn't strike me as creepy, but what did I know? I was one small step up from a tourist. I thought their color-clashing outfits were daring and fashion-forward.

We waited around a long time, sitting in Rita's chairs. Okay, so once or twice I went back inside to use the bathroom, where there were, thankfully, no monuments to Dad's greatness. It's possible that a couple of Dad's pictures ended up in my pocket. I'd send them back after I had them copied.

Neighbors walked back and forth, going about their business and everyone else's. Some of them stopped and stared. Others were more discreet about it: they did their staring while they walked.

I wondered if Takis and Stavros were enjoying themselves. They'd parked at the end of the street, several cars away from the Peptomobile. If this was their idea of discretion, they sucked at their jobs.

Aunt Rita and I eventually abandoned our posts. Dina wasn't high priority. She was more like an annoyance, a fly my aunt wanted to zap. On the way back to the safe house we stopped to grab pizza, Greek-style. Which meant it had an oilier crust, more sauce, and less cheese than pizza back home. The cheese was a mix of a mozzarella

and cheddar.

"Mama knows you're in Greece." Aunt Rita grabbed the pizza and we trotted back to her car. "So do you want to ditch the safe house and come back to the compound?"

"So she can drug me again? Forget it."

"She won't drug you again."

I gave her a look and she shrugged. "Could be she'll put you in the dungeon."

My cousins followed us to the not-so-safe house. We knew they were there, and they knew we knew. With that much knowledge whizzing around, they abandoned all pretense and took up tailgating.

When we arrived at the safe house, Aunt Rita and I sat on the car's pink hood, inhaling pizza, while Stavros and Takis cast sad puppy eyes in our direction.

No sympathy. If they wanted pizza they could buzz off and get their own.

Chapter 15

THE NIGHT WAS one noisy SOB in the olive grove. Goat bells clanged. Wind stage-whispered. Boy cicadas serenaded the girls. I contributed with my occasional, "Get off my front lawn!"

The sun beat me up by about two hours. Thanks to the crowd of olive trees shading the safe house's aluminum roof, it couldn't reach in and slap me out of the sack, so I indulged. Dad's status as an abductee, and the knowledge that my time on this earth was possibly even more limited than my high school biology teacher led me to believe, ultimately shoed me outside. The pump water was frigid, and something was snuffling around inside the outhouse—probably Greek giant hornets—so I changed clothes and took the scooter for a spin, desperately seeking a McDonalds or a similar establishment where the bathroom had hot water and a bug-free commode.

The scooter puttered along the coastal road. Eateries went where the money was, and where the money was was on the beachfront roads, where tourists flocked to their establishments in between bouts of sun.

I was cruising when I spotted a familiar face on the steps of a tired old beach house. Penka, the Slavic dealer of prescription drugs, was peddling pills with a colleague. Her sidekick was spaghetti thin, a redhead with an upper lip in dire need of wax. The hair wasn't natural but the mustache was homegrown.

I watched as Penka swapped a foil packet for a wad of euros. Her customer was respectable, clean. He looked like a school teacher.

"Hey! You're not in jail," I called out, waving. Her customer pocketed the foil and hurried away.

"Always they arrest me but they never keep me."

"How does that work?"

She shrugged, almost popping out of her tank top. "Luck. And maybe I threaten to put Bulgarian curse on them."

That would do it. Greeks took curse threats seriously. Dad was always sending me off to school with a black and blue eye pendant pinned to the inside of my shirts. He tucked garlic between my mattress and the springs. Occasionally, when Mom wasn't looking, he spat on me.

Penka waved me over. "You looking to buy? Because I no sell hard drugs." She said *drugs* in English but pronounced it *droogs*. "You want sisa, you go find Russian whore."

"Screw you," the hairy-lipped friend said. "Russia shits on Bulgaria."

Penka rolled her eyes at me. "Tasha is Russian."

Evidently. "Does she sell sisa?"

"She sell all the things, including her holes."

Tasha shrugged. "I am smart businesswoman. I diversify."

I glanced around, scoping the traffic to see if I had a tail this morning. If I did, they were Grandma's A team, because they rocked at hiding. The other guys could take lessons, maybe learn something.

Back to the dealers. Tasha was glassy-eyed, obviously sampling her wares, checking it for defects. No need, I wanted to tell her. Looked like it was working fine, zapping synapses, turning her skin to pizza. Not Penka, though. She was clear and razor sharp. Probably the cops cut themselves on Penka all the time, which is why they shook her loose not long after they reeled her in. The two women were on the streets where things got dirty, which made me wonder if they knew the Baptist, in or out of uniform.

"I'm looking for someone," I said. "Maybe you've seen him?"

"Do I look like I see anybody? I am blind." Penka closed both eyes and felt around to prove her point.

"Great acting. I almost believed it."

"Really?"

"No."

"Too bad. I want to be actress. Go to Bollywood."

"You mean Hollywood?"

"No, the Bollywood. I like dancing." She shimmied on the step. The stoop shook with her.

"Keep trying," I said. "Maybe get a dog to help with the act."

She sighed like she was gunning for an Oscar. "Who you look for?"

"A guy they call the Baptist."

Tasha leaned forward, pressed her elbows into her knees. Her breath was sour and her pits had tufts of hair like a troll doll. "Is he lost?"

"I don't think so."

"Then why you look for him?"

"Do you know him?"

"Maybe I do." She shrugged one-shouldered, losing a strap. "Maybe I don't."

"They say he's an ex cop." *They* was Melas, but I didn't tell them that. I was loyal-ish to a fault. "He ever come around?"

The Russian woman shrugged. "Not here. He eat higher up food chain."

"What if he did come around?"

"I would give him what he want," Tasha said. "Anything."

"I hear he kills people. Criminal people."

"Greece is not so safe now," the Russian dealer told me. "I come Greece to run away from violence. And what happens? Violence. I come just before country turn to shit. Lucky me."

Penka was focused on the beach behind me. "Not me," she murmured. "If I saw him I would run. I know what he does and how he does it. The police, they let it go because he was one of them. He does their jobs." She spat on the ground, the wet flecks boiling away before they had a chance to dampen the concrete. "Our last boss was his victim. the Baptist drown him in rain puddle."

My stomach churned. I lost all feeling in my fingers and toes. "What happened?"

"What do they do? Nothing. The police come, take the body, then nothing is what they do. At doing nothing they are genius."

"Enough," Tasha said. "You go too far."

"I tell her nothing she does not already know." Her gaze scraped itself up off the concrete and crashed into mine. "Yes?"

My answer was a nod. I saved the words for a warning, for all the good it would do out on the streets. "Be safe out here."

I fired up the scooter and zipped away, wind slapping my face. The fast-moving air sharpened my edges, but that made things worse. My heart's tachometer was spiking into the red zone. No way did I want to wind up facedown in a puddle, with the local police caring only that another piece of trash was off the streets, without them having to lift a finger or gun. I wanted a look at Greece's other face, because this one was a real bitch. She was cruel, callous, and corrupt. I wanted the sparkling water, the pale sandy beaches, the buff waiters in skimpy clothing, the man walking his donkey.

What I wanted was the postcard.

I was loaded for bear. And the bear was Detective Melas and the Volos Police Department. I killed the engine. Kicked down the stand. Barged through the police department's open doors and past the stacks of bricks. Stormed through the building like I was Hurricane Katerina.

Melas shoved back his chair and stood, his mouth loaded with protests.

I shoved my hand in his face, not giving a rat's ass if I was rubbing metaphorical crap in his face or calling him on his jacking habits. "Talk to the hand," I said in Greek. Translating drained some of the punch out of it, but he got the hint and backed down.

His desk quaked as I jumped up. I kicked aside the open folder, the stack of paperwork, the flat metal baskets marked Inbox and Outbox, and addressed the sweaty masses. They didn't look too worried about my wrath, just curious. They weren't sheep—they were goats. Sheep would have run.

Hands on hips. "My name is Katerina Makris," I told them in my outside voice. "If that name is familiar, it's because I'm Katerina Makri's granddaughter. Yes, that one." Now that I had their attention, I shot a lot of pointy eye-daggers. "There's someone trying to kill me and I know he's one of yours—or he used to be. I get it, he takes out the garbage you're either all too chicken or lazy or incompetent to handle, so maybe you sit back with your eyes closed and let him do his psycho thing. But I've never broken the law. Until a few days ago, I had no knowledge of my family or what they do. None. I was a debt collector, for Chrissake."

I paused for a second, mostly for effect, and partly because who's never wanted to smash a debt collector's knees? Probably I should have kept that part to myself.

"Yet because of what my family does, he's painted a big target on my back. I'm not garbage. So what happens when he kills me? You just going to shrug and mutter about how I had it coming? Does the Prime Minister know how corrupt you are? The President? The media? I bet they'd love a story about police corruption."

"Chicken?" someone asked.

"It's an American expression," I explained. "It's like … like … like calling someone an *adelfi*." A sister. Call a Greek guy a sister, he knows you think his Y chromosome is a lie.

Melas cleared his throat. He was standing beside his desk, hand outstretched.

"I'm not done," I said.

"Yes, you are. Come on."

His hand was warm, his voice hot chocolate fondue, lulling me into a false sense of security. It would all be okay. The police would help. Soylent Green wasn't really people. Mankind wouldn't be conquered by apes. Darth Vader was not my father.

Melas lead me through the building, down a hall in dire need of paint, into a room with two holding cells.

"You rat dropping," I said, as the dime circled the wishing well in my head and plopped in. "I hate you."

"I can live with that."

"You say that now," I muttered. Fighting was pointless. He didn't see me as any kind of threat, and he was right. To him I approximately as dangerous as one of those shivering, yapping dogs celebrities tote around in handbags. He shoved me into the holding cell, bag and all.

"What are you going to do with me?"

The door clinked shut. "Deport you."

"You don't have the authority."

Maybe he did, but technically I was a Greek citizen. All you need is

one Greek parent or grandparent and they've got you for life. Mom did all the paperwork years ago so I'd have choices.

Melas grinned. "Who said I was doing it the legal way? I'm calling your grandmother."

I reeled off a string of colorful words in two languages. Farm animals, religious figures, and Mrs. Melas might have been involved in various configurations. Melas leaned against the wall, arms folded, grin sprawling.

"I like your imagination," he said when I was done. "Except the part with the animals and my mother."

"Funny. That was my best work."

His grin died a quick, painless death. "Look, this is for your own good."

"You mean for your own good. No way do you want me running to the media."

"You think I want you to wind up dead? I don't. My job is to keep you alive."

"But you won't give me a lead on the Baptist. I need to find him."

He shoved away from the wall, stormed over to the cell door, pushed his face up to the bars. Too bad he was on the outside—they suited him. "You're a girl. You're a civilian. You're a bill collector. You're … you're … pretty. And you're on his radar. Your grandmother and me, we want to get you off it."

"Could you *be* more sexist?"

The grin returned—sort of. "This is one of my better days."

Chapter 16

I HAD to hand it to Grandma: the woman moved fast. I'd been caged for under an hour when she shoved past Melas and swept in like Greek royalty. Impressive for a little black Weeble.

"*Yia sou*," I said, figuring it wouldn't hurt to be friendly. Brownie points were always good to have.

An invisible being stabbed her forehead with Botox, shooting her eyebrows into an unnatural arch. "Oh, look what the cat carried in. It is Katerina, the girl who is not supposed to be here. What a surprise."

The sarcasm was strong with this one.

"You accidentally sent me back home."

"That was not an accident."

"To you." I snuggled my face up to the bars. "But that's okay, I forgive you."

"You forgive me, do you? What a lucky woman I am." She swung around, snapped, "What are you waiting for? An invitation? Open the door!" at Melas.

"Don't open the door," I bit back.

Melas froze, hand and key midair.

"Open it."

"I'd prefer to stay here."

Grandma stomped out. I'd won.

Hooray!

I'd stood my ground and won this battle. To celebrate, I flopped onto the narrow cot, hands behind my head. So what if I was in Shawshank? I'd fought the great and terrible Baboulas and kept my head.

Victory turned out to be short-lived. My grandmother returned several moments later with her hellhound. Xander was coming at me like I was a basic math problem and he was armed with a pencil and a calculator. He wanted to work me out so he could move onto the next, hopefully more challenging, problem. And his plan was to do it in style. He was in black dress trousers, fashionable black shoes, and a crisp white button-down shirt, with the sleeves rolled to the most flattering point on his tree trunks. He nodded to Melas, who unlocked the door and swung it open.

I leaped off the rock-like slab and hurled myself at the bars this cell shared with the next. My arms curled around the metal. This was my tree. I was going to hug it until the bulldozer rolled away.

Xander hoisted me up by the waist. Pulled. But I didn't budge.

"Not going," I said through gritted teeth.

He pulled again. Whatever he did for a workout—sparred with orcs, wrestled with giants—it was paying off. My resolve wasn't loosening but my arms were suggesting I should consider letting go if I didn't want them to perform a humiliating twig-snap.

Melas was leaning against the doorjamb grinning. It was a miracle he hadn't brought popcorn to this spectacle. But he had brought friends. The rest of the department was crowding in, jostling to get a good look at the American and the henchman tussle.

"Katerina, enough!" Grandma's face was unreadable.

"It's my life," I said. "I'll say when it's enough." To my dismay I was losing ground, fast. My arms had thrown in the towel—I was down to fingers.

"My Virgin Mary, you are obstinate like your father!" She flung open the door to the adjoining cell, delivered a crushing blow to my knuckles with her handbag. "Let go!" My fingers unclenched. They couldn't take a beating, the pansies.

Xander threw me over his shoulder.

And that's the story of how I left the building.

Grandma said nothing. Not a peep the whole way back to the compound. I turned in the backseat to see Takis struggling to keep up with the SUV. The grimace on his face said he wasn't a fan of the pink scooter.

Cry me a freakin' river.

When we arrived back at Grandma's the compound was quiet, apart from the cats and dogs. In the sky the sun was touching noon, and everyone was eating the day's main meal before siesta. Some were inside. Others were outside on their balconies, eating al fresco.

Takis tugged at his shirt's buttoned neck. A bug had committed suicide on the white cotton. "My God," he said. "Marika is making *tiganites* for lunch. I don't want to miss them. If I don't hurry the kids will get them all."

"Her fries are that good?" I asked.

"Nobody in the world makes better *tiganites* than Marika. I don't know what magic she does to the potatoes, but …" He kissed his fingertips. "This is why I married her, for her fried potatoes." He trotted over to the far left side of the compound, where the stairs would take him to his roomy apartment.

Now it was Grandma, Xander, and me. Or rather: Grandma, Me, and Xander, and a cloud of dogs.

I turned around and said, walking backwards, "Miss me?"

Xander snorted, but I thought he kind of did miss me. He was trying to hide a smile, but bits of it were leaking out the edges.

"Katerina!" Grandma barked. For a tiny woman she sure could project.

"Hey!" a male voice called out.

I turned back around to see Cookie jogging towards us across the courtyard. He'd stuffed his package into a Speedo that outlined all its contents. Mostly undressed, he reminded me of a castaway from Miami Beach. He was missing the mojito and the gold medallion, but he was cultivating a wicked pornstache to make up for the loss.

"Look who it is! Mikey Far's girl. You're back! "Where'd you go? Did you find Mikey yet?"

"No, and I probably never will now. Not with—" I mouthed, *Attila*. "—running the show."

He chuckled. Grandma shot me a dirty look, but I blew her off with two palms up and an innocent shrug.

My goat was glad to see me. He trotted over, showing his affection by scarfing down the tissue in my pocket.

"You didn't cook him," I said to Grandma.

"Too tough. Too stringy. Who wants to eat that?"

I cupped his head in my hands, gazed into his slitted eyes. "Don't listen to her. She likes you, otherwise you'd be on the spit." Now that he'd said his hellos, my goat went back to romping with his new canine buddies.

Cookie followed us into Grandma's house, flip-flops flapping on his feet.

"Sit," Grandma said when we were all inside, and she'd closed the door so I couldn't bolt. She picked up my grandfather's oil tin, stood it in the middle of the kitchen table. "I am the reason you are not in jail right now."

I nodded to Granddad on the oil can. "Is he allowed to do that?"

She looked confused. "Do what?"

"Put his feet on the table."

Xander's lips twitched. Cookie roared. "I like this girl," he said, patting his gut.

Grandma was unamused and refused to be diverted from the point she was desperate to make. "I want you to take a good look."

"At the oil can?"

"At your grandfather."

I leaned forward, elbows on table. He was still dead, still wearing a toupee.

"Is this like Spot the Difference?"

"What is she talking about?" Grandma appealed to the men. "I have

no idea what she is talking about."

"It's a game in the newspapers," Cookie told her. "Two pictures side by side. The same. Until you look closer. The goal is to find what's different about the two pictures." He'd pulled up a chair at Grandma's table, helped himself to a couple of diamonds of baklava. "This is great," he said. "Almost as good as my sister's."

Grandma's eyes were black shiny pebbles. "Almost as good, eh? What a compliment."

No. No compliment. His days were numbered—single digits.

"You want a little baklava, Katerina?" she asked me.

No. No freakin' way. Everything in her kitchen was officially suspect. "I'm not hungry."

"I think you should eat the baklava."

When she put it like that … "I guess I could eat."

She made a satisfied noise and lifted the glass dome on the countertop, where the treasure sat steeping in its honey syrup.

The screen door screeched pitifully and Aunt Rita teetered in. Today she was one of the Pink Ladies from Grease. Pink jacket, tight black pants, high-heeled clogs, pink scarf knotted around her neck.

Cookie looked her up and down. "Rita, I saw you at my wake. You looked good."

Hand on hip: "Honey, I always look good."

"I remember when you used to have balls."

"I still have them," Aunt Rita said. "I just tuck them up high, that's all."

My grandmother's mouth tightened, but she said nothing.

The baklava's thin layers snapped as I hacked through them with my fork. "How does that work?" A lot of the time it didn't seem like there was enough room in my underwear for woman parts, so it boggled my mind how a guy could tuck it all up and go.

"It's like wrapping a gift."

"Never ask me to wrap a gift. I'm hopeless at it," I admitted.

"Not me," Aunt Rita said. "I can make wrapping paper look like anything you want." She wiggled her fingers. "Origami."

Grandma had reached the end of her very short rope. "Xander, privacy. I want to talk to my granddaughter."

Maybe it was my imagination, but it looked to me like the blood drained out of Aunt Rita's pancaked face. *Good luck*, she mouthed, then she skedaddled with the two men.

Two fighters left in the ring. I had youth, but Grandma had a warped sense of morality. She took her seat at the table. Her face was hard. Her lines seemed as though they'd been carved eons ago. Life hadn't been easy for the woman. I wondered who she used to be in the old days, before she was left holding the Family's bloody reins.

"Look at your grandfather. No jokes. What do you see?"

"A picture of a dead man taped to an olive oil can."

She shook her hands at the ceiling. "Yes, that is what you see. And do you know why that is what you see?"

Was this one of those trick questions? Because it felt like a trick question. "No?"

Her hands landed in her lap with a dull thud. "Because your grandfather is dead and he is inside that can. I am worried—" She thumped a fist on her chest, held it there as though she were trying to prevent her heart's next beat. "—that soon I will have another can on that window ledge, and on it a picture of you."

I gulped. "Are you going to kill me?"

"No! My God, Katerina, of course not. You are my family, my blood. My only granddaughter."

"You drugged me."

"For a good reason."

"Then you sent me home—against my will."

"To protect you."

"I'm twenty-eight. Staying here to find Dad was *my* choice. You don't get to decide otherwise."

"You are my grandchild. I care about you."

Her words punched me all the painful places. She had no right—not now. I couldn't help lashing out.

"Really? Where have you been all my life? Where were you when Mom died? Nowhere, that's where. In your stupid hut, running the underworld. So you don't get to control me now."

Silence. Then, "You do not like my house?"

"It should be condemned. The toilet is outside. *Outside*."

"In my day, many people had toilets outside."

"Well, in my day they don't."

She pushed back her chair. Stood. A shriveled old coffee bean shrouded in black, she appeared benign, fragile, yet she kind of scared the dickens out of me.

"Do not cross me again, Katerina. I run this family." She stabbed at her chest with her index finger. "I protect it. Never defy me in front of the others or I will be forced to act against you."

Did I back down? Nope. "Have you learned *anything* about Dad's kidnapping? Even one tiny thing?"

"No."

"Don't you think that's strange? You have money, power, a … a dungeon, but you can't find out anything?"

"I am bothered by it very much. But it is only a matter of time until somebody talks or his abductor reveals themselves. They want something—something that belongs to this Family."

"What?"

"Who knows? But I am afraid it will be something that is not mine to give and I will not be able to save my son."

"Like what?"

No answer. She shuffled over to the pantry, pulled out the flour, the sugar, the butter. This, I was starting to notice, was how she dealt.

Late afternoon, while the compound was beginning to stir after a long, peaceful siesta, the dogs went wild. Grandma was sprinkling chopped walnuts on what looked like turds drenched in honey syrup. We hadn't slept. Something told me she never did, and that same something told me I never would. I was too Americanized and too old to take midday naps, even if the idea of them made me drool over the decadence of it all. Grandma dropped the nuts, wiped her hands on her black apron and bustled out the front door.

I bolted after her.

The dogs had congregated around the pool's fence. They were attempting to leap over or push through the bars, but so far they had only managed to be ineffectual battering rams. A fully dressed Xander was wading into the pool, and the rest of the family was beginning to dribble out into the courtyard to see what all the commotion was about.

Cookie. Cookie was the commotion. Facedown in the pool, Dad's former best friend was an untethered boat, drifting at the mercy of the pump's whims. Either he was dead or he was gunning for breath-holding as a new sport in the Summer Olympics. The gut suggested athletics wasn't his thing, so I was going with dead. Acid jumped in my stomach, made a grab for my uvula as leverage. As soon as Xander reached Cookie he flipped the man over and towed him back to the concrete shore.

Papou rolled to a stop beside me. "We should cut off his head, make sure he is really dead this time."

"No decapitation," Grandma said.

"How about a stake through the heart?" he asked, hopeful.

"He is a man not a vampire."

"So you say." He winked at me behind her back.

"I saw that."

"Everything she sees." He grabbed his crotch. "Did you see that, old woman?"

"How can I when there is nothing to see?"

He snorted but couldn't manage a laugh, despite the levity of his word. I thought I understood why. We were all Russian nesting dolls—

not just me. Under the skin we wore another skin. And under that, another. Cookie wasn't just a mobster, a criminal, a godfather of his own smaller family. Beneath all the layers—the Bartholomew Cubbins hats—Cookie was still the little boy who used to play with Dad. Wasn't a dead man Papou and Grandma were seeing, but a kid who'd drowned in the pool.

There's nothing funny about that. Nothing commonplace—not even in their line of work. A dead kid is a sign someone really screwed things up.

One of my cousins, I discovered, was a physician. He rushed to Xander's side and knelt beside the dead man. Between them they tried all the tricks but it was too late. Cookie was gone—for good. No faking.

Grandma looked at me, and this time I could read every line etched into her leathery skin. the Baptist had been here. Again.

Her walls couldn't keep him out.

Chapter 17

I'D BEEN LOOKING FORWARD to a dip in Grandma's pool, but knowing it had dead guy cooties scratched the shine off the idea. That didn't mean I couldn't enjoy it from one of the surrounding deck chairs. Just me and my goat and a million winking stars. The water was a flat sheet of glass, the lights inside turning it an eerie shade of pale green, the color of paint drying on a morgue wall. If I dived in, where would I end up: in my own meat locker or Narnia?

A man died here because someone else decided he shouldn't live.

That same someone had decided my life was forfeit, thanks to a slip of DNA.

There was no easing on down the road toward finding Dad until I'd scrubbed my name off the Baptist's naughty list. Which mean I had to convince him I was a fundamentally decent person or kill him.

Or get him locked up.

The middle idea didn't strike my fancy. Killing was in my blood but it wasn't in my heart or hands. Which meant I was down to two choices, neither of which was appealing. How does one reason with a psycho who truly believes his path is righteous? And how does one lure that righteous nut into a bear trap?

I kicked off my shoes, dunked my toes into the water, sending gentle shockwaves through the illusion. Arms outstretched, I fell forward. Cooties be damned, I was already contaminated.

The water shattered. I curled up into the fetal position, let myself sink the way an anchor does when it's pushed overboard.

When I burst up out of the water I wasn't in Narnia, or Fillory, or any of the magic places. I was still stuck in Greece, my situation unchanged.

"No bikini?"

"Argh!" My body almost shot out of its skin. Detective Melas was standing poolside, arms folded. His grin was indecent, at best.

"I always swim fully clothed. That way I can avoid cops and other perverts."

"You got something against law enforcement?"

Treading water, I ignored him. "Jesus. What are you thinking sneaking up on me? You're lucky you didn't get shot."

"Relax, I've got permission to be here."

"Not from me you don't."

He sat in my chair, looked at my goat. "What's with the goat?"

"It's sacrificial. But now you're here so he gets to go free. What are you doing here?"

"Asking questions." He reached out, petted my goat. The beast went to him willingly, the hussy. "Hear you had some problems earlier."

"Your guys already came and went. They asked questions and we answered them."

"And now we've got a dead previously dead man in the morgue. The plan is to sneak him back into his coffin and let his sister know. No one's ready for another Cookie funeral."

"Sounds complicated," I said, hauling myself out of the water. My dress was glue. It clung to me in all the wrong places. Melas was gawking. "Does that happen a lot?"

"This job, I see a lot of weird things. You find him?"

"The dogs found him. The rest of us followed the dogs." I was trying to calculate precisely how much I should or shouldn't say. Probably Grandma didn't want me saying a word, but he was the law, so I was compelled—or something like that.

He stood up. Nodded at my wet clothes. "Go get dressed. Something pretty and dry. I'm taking you out. Maybe I'll even kiss you again."

No way. Was he high?

"Wow, what an offer. Let me think about it … No."

"What have you done since you've been here? Anything touristy? You came to Greece and saw nothing, did nothing. That how you want it to be?"

"Hey, I saw dead people." But he had a good point. "It would be nice to have some fun."

"I can do fun." His voice dipped. His gaze dropped to my wet chest. "I specialize in fun."

I bet he did. The few licks I'd already had of that cake were delicious. So I got changed, put on a dress that was somewhere between church and bar, and hoped I could keep my hands to myself if he couldn't.

Grandma was holding court in the kitchen, feeding the hungry while they listened. Aunt Rita, Papou, Takis, and Xander were there, with a handful of the others. Some I didn't recognize. The woman must have been a sardine packer in a former life. How else did she fit so many people in her tight kitchen with its low roof?

She inspected me. "Did you forget something?"

Mental inventory time. Shoes, underwear, earrings, lipgloss, and enough mascara to make Bambi jealous.

"No."

"Yes." She nodded to Xander. "Go with Katerina."

"What? No way. I'm going out with a policeman. I'll be fine."

"Xander goes or you don't go."

Our earlier conversation swam back, the one about not defying her in front of others. I could do that. I would do that, if that's what it took to win her cooperation.

I nodded, but it was a chore.

Ugh! Imagine what a nightmare she'd have been when I was a teenager. I was suddenly glad Dad had run away to America. He did me a massive favor raising me thousands of miles away from his ball-crushing mother.

I pointed at Xander. "Be unobtrusive. Can you do that?"

No. No, he couldn't. His motorcycle's headlamp rode our butts all the way to the coast. When we parked, I saw the motorcycle was new but otherwise identical to the one Baby Dimitri's buddy blew up. Xander stayed a good twelve feet back, all the way to our table on the water's concrete edge, then he melted into the crowd.

If the waterfront was beautiful by daylight, by night it was magic. Fairy lights were strung across the street, looped from lamppost to lamppost. They danced in the sea, and I could have easily sat there all night, watching them twirl. Music clashed all over the place. Restaurants and tavernas had their fresh seafood on display. Choose your own dead Nemo, caught earlier that day. Volos and the waterfront villages of the Pelion area all did this, Melas told me. At night they sealed off their promenades and filled the docks with tables and chairs. The street became a safe place for foot traffic. Everybody, it seemed, flocked to the waterfront to socialize.

"What are we doing here?" I asked Melas.

"I don't know about you, but I'm eating. Or I will be when the food comes."

My brain whirred. He'd thrown me in jail, handcuffed me to a pole, and now we were on a date?

"It's not a date," he said, reading my mind.

"Of course it's not." Was that a pang of disappointment in my voice? Better squash it fast. "I wouldn't be here if it was."

"Yeah, you would. You like me."

"We're oil and water. I'm wet and you're greasy." Wasn't helping my situation, was I?

He leaned back in his chair. "Want to tell me how Cookie's murder went down?"

"Was it a murder?"

"Medical Examiner says yes."

"I don't know. Grandma and I were in the kitchen when we heard the dogs freak out. We went to investigate, and there was Cookie, floating like the *S.S. Poseidon*."

The waiter showed up. He was lean-hipped and fit and flirty, one of those dishes who knew he was tasty. Melas ordered wine for us both, and I guess I didn't mind too much, otherwise I would have protested.

"The Baptist is a creep," he said when the waiter left. "You didn't know him when he was a cop. He toyed with perps. Tortured them. Got off on hurting them, mentally and physically. He's still that way. He's deluded, thinks he's on some kind of righteous crusade. Being a cop wasn't enough for him." His attention shifted to the water, then back to me. "There are times our hands are tied, when we have to let the bad guys walk, so he bailed. Now he's doing things his way. To extremes."

"I figured he'd screwed up and you guys tossed him out."

He shook his head. "He walked with a big, fat government pension."

"Why does he drown them, his victims?"

A plate of fried calamari appeared on the table with a garlicky dipping sauce. I wanted a shovel, but all I had was a fork.

"He used to tell a story. You know they're always saying drowning is peaceful? You struggle in the beginning, but when the panic stops, then it's calm all the way down to the bottom. the Baptist, he nearly drowned when he was in the army. They were parachuting and something went wrong, and he ended up swallowing half a river. Almost died out there. He said there was nothing peaceful, nothing calm about it. Only terror and pain all the way down. That's what he wants for his victims. Suffering to the end. Figures they deserve it."

I skewed a piece of calamari, unable to resist any longer. "He struck me as a sadist, like he's in love with the idea of pain and suffering."

"Why aren't you terrified?"

"I'm shaking in my boots, but it's overshadowed by all the anger. I can't take care of priority number one until he backs off. I hate him for getting in my way."

The waiter wandered back over, refilled our wine. Melas looked at me and I shrugged, so he ordered for us. While he was *ocupado* with the waiter, I scanned the crowd, hunting and pecking for Xander. Wherever he was he was good. I bet he ruled at hide-and-seek when he was a kid.

"Thanks," I said. "I'm finding it hard to think tonight."

"Death's not easy to see, and murder's even harder. Go easy on yourself."

"My family takes it in stride. I'm the odd one out. I feel like I should be able to shrug it off."

"There'd be something wrong with you if you did. First time I saw a dead body on the job I spray-painted the pavement with gyro."

I inspected the glass in my hand. The liquid was red and slightly sweet. Normally wine caught in my throat and gave me a wicked headache, but this stuff went down easy. "I actually hate wine."

"Who hates wine? You can't be Greek if you hate wine."

"Tonight I don't hate wine."

"Tonight you *need* wine."

"I hope I can stop myself before it's too late."

"Too late for what?"

It was deft, the way I changed the subject. Very clever. "What did you order?"

"You'll see."

When the food came it was moussaka again—hot, fresh, equal parts saucy and cheesy.

"Yum, yum," I said, brightening up. It's hard to be sad around good food.

Melas watched me dig in. I tried not to food-orgasm on the spot, but it took all my self-control.

After a moment he said, "My mother wants her plate back."

"Did you tell her how you lost it?"

"Sure. I told her some crazy woman stole it."

My eyebrows hiked north. My mouth was too busy chewing to ask, and I'd grown past the old joke about see-food; bound to be one of those things that got lost in translation anyway. He didn't elaborate, so eventually I was forced to take a break.

"You cuffed me to a pole, tortured me, then bailed. And I'm the crazy one?"

"You broke into my house."

"Yeah, because I needed your help."

"When I want help I ask for it. You should try that sometime."

I lowered my voice so I wouldn't make a scene. "I would have asked but you cuffed me to a pole!"

"You need to work on your delivery."

Stalemate.

We both got down to the serious business of eating. Melas was easy company when we weren't sparring. Before long, my body chose to forget I was being hunted. My knots loosened and unraveled. I people-watched for the love of watching people live and laugh. The waiter came and went like the tide, leaving several inches of wine in my glass each time. Finally, I leaned back in my chair and let out a contented groan. Not exactly ladylike, but this wasn't a date.

"If this isn't a date, what is it?"

He tapped his fingers on the table. "A business proposition."

"Holy hell," I said. "You think I'm a prostitute?"

"I couldn't afford you if you were." He leaned on the table, eyes dark and deadly serious. Wherever this was going, it wasn't someplace happy. "A few months ago, one of my informants washed ashore. A low-level drug dealer with friends in a lot of crooked places. Medical Examiner said she drowned, but not in the gulf. The water in her lungs was fresh and blue."

"Blue?"

"Toilet water. Wherever she drowned they had one of those blue tablets in the cistern. She was an okay person. Saw a lot of hard times, knew a lot of bad people. But she didn't deserve to die. Anyway, wasn't long we all came to the same conclusion: the Baptist did it. Wasn't like him to take out the small fish, though. Normally he hits higher up the chain of command. Want to kill a tree, chainsaw the roots. Plucking a few leaves does nothing. The tree makes new leaves.

"Next thing we know, more informants start showing up dead. All drowned, one way or another."

"Where does Kefalas Olives fit into this?"

"George Kefalas was an informant. He was one of the big bad guys, but he was also dishing out information we needed. That's why I was at Kefalas Olives that day."

An awful thought bonked me over the head. "Information about my family?"

"Some of it."

"What about Cookie?"

Two palms up. "We don't know."

An old conversation flooded back, the one Cookie and I had shared in the cemetery the night Grandma drugged me and sent me home on the redeye. To share or not to share, that was the question. Cookie was dead now—what could it hurt? So I shared.

Melas fell quiet. It was the kind of quiet that wanted to be left alone, the kind of quiet I usually respected. So what did I do? I threw a brick at it.

"Why didn't you guys haul the Baptist in when you knew what he was doing?"

"We tried. We were overruled."

"By whom?"

He shook his head. "Don't know. He had a long career in law enforcement, made a lot of important friends. Most of the others, they were okay with following the order not to bring him in."

"What about the lost informants? Didn't that put a crimp in business?"

"Yeah, we took a big hit. It's a problem."

"I can't believe everyone's backing down from a murderer. It's so … cowardly. Cops are supposed to *be* the good guys."

"We're not all backing down. Our informants are supposed to be confidential, so someone inside was handing out information, violating their privacy and safety. We rely on them. A good informant goes places we can't go."

The horrible thoughts were lining up, one right after the other. Here came the next one. "Oh, God. You don't want me to be an informant, do you?"

His laugh was more bark than mirth. "No, but I need your help."

Damn, this guy had some massive stones. Where was he when I needed help? Eating moussaka while I was cuffed to a chair, that's where.

"What kind of help?"

"We've tried looking for the Baptist in all the usual places. His home, his family, friends. But he hasn't had contact with them in months as far as I can tell. He's staying well-hidden. He comes out to play then vanishes again."

"You think someone is hiding him?"

"Maybe. That or he's hiding out in abandoned buildings, or even in one of the groves. Greece is filled with good hiding places. And with the economy the way it is, it's not difficult to buy discretion when necessary."

After the waiter carried our plates away, he showed up with the good stuff. The stuff I would have ordered first had I known about it. *Galaktobouriko*—custard pie wrapped in flaky phyllo—and *loukoumadas*—round, fried balls of dough—that looked happy to be sacrificially drowned in syrup. If it had been anything other than honey I might have balked, given our conversation, but it's hard to be repulsed when there's that much sugar on the table. Melas divvied them up so we could share. I could have been mistaken, but it seemed to me his halves were bigger. But it was his euro so I didn't complain.

Oh, the waiter brought coffee, too, but … dessert!

I loaded up my fork."What would you want me to do?"

"Live your life. Go out in public a lot. Get some sun."

The penny dropped. An axe fell. A gloomy bell tolled. All the clichés. "Bait. You want me to be bait."

"You're the only living person we know who's got a number."

"Yes, and I'm trying to get rid of it."

"We'll protect you."

"We who?"

"The police."

Ho-ho-ho. Ha-ha-ha. He-he-he. "Because you're doing beautifully so

far. This guy has slipped past the compound's security twice—twice!

"Some of your grandmother's guys are gonna help protect you."

"Grandma's in on this plan? I should just go home, let you guys hunt this clown on your own. Why should I help you?"

"Because we *are* the good guys."

"You have to give me more than that. Even good guys don't do things *just because*."

There was a long pause, every moment of it awkward and baggage-filled. Two palms up, he said, "You got me." I lifted an eyebrow. He leaned forward, inserting himself smack in the middle of my personal space. "My son's mother is an informant."

All my fight fizzled away. "Jesus. What does she do? Drug dealer? Hooker?"

He pulled back. "She's married to the mob."

"Which Family?"

His gaze slid away, landing in his dessert.

No, no, no, no.

"Damn it." I dropped my fork on the plate. "Melas … Who else knows?"

"Nobody. It's over now. It's been over for some time."

The flavor had magically vanished out of my share of the sweets. Even the sugar was gone, leaving me with chunks of what tasted like tissue. I shoved the plate away, pulled the coffee closer. It was muddy, bitter, strong enough to kick the sandman in the sack. Two gulps later, it was history.

Who was she? There were a lot of wives at the compound and others camped around the area, some of whom I hadn't met yet. Quite a few of them had at least one son about the right age to belong to Melas. I squashed my curiosity. No good could come from me knowing. That was the only way his secret—and hers—could stay safe. She wasn't just raising Melas's son as one of the family, she was also an informant. She was leaking family business.

A leak that could wind up plugged by a psycho ex cop. Or by my grandmother, if she found out. I didn't want to see a boy motherless. Been there, done the dead parent. The pain never fades.

My loyalty jumped all over the place.

One thing at a time, Kat. Stop the psycho first, then figure out what to do about the leak—if anything.

"Okay," I said. "How do we do this? Tell me how you're not going to get me killed."

"I'm wiring you up. Bug in your room, GPS on your phone. Every time you move I'll know it, one way or another."

"And my grandmother's okay with this?"

"She didn't scramble to the top of the heap by being stupid."

"I figured she'd be glad informants are biting it. They're not good for business."

"Biting what?"

The babel fish had scrambled our signals again.

"Biting the bullet. Dying. It's an American thing."

The confusion on his face cleared up. "They're great for business, as long as they're not informing on her. Anyway, the Baptist has crossed a serious line she's not happy about. He's invaded her turf twice and he's threatened her only granddaughter. She wants him dead."

"And what do you want?"

"The cop in me wants him in jail, paying for his crimes. The rest of me knows he won't pay one cent for anything in lockup."

"He could be long gone, for all you know."

"He's arrogant. You ever read our mythology? Hubris never wins. Hubris is going to be his downfall—hubris and me."

"What if it isn't. What if you fail? Who'll find my father then?"

He reached over, folded my hand in his. Heat radiated up my arm, but it was a comforting warmth. "I will. But that's not going to happen." His eyes were soft and soulful. "I don't play to lose."

Were we still talking about the Baptist? "This isn't a game to me."

He leaned back in his chair, laughed like I was something small and adorable. A puppy. A kitten. A junior bacon cheeseburger.

"You're something else. If things were different, if we weren't on different sides …"

"The only side I'm on is Dad's and mine."

He looked at me, and when he spoke it was gentle. "And which side is he on?"

It was a good question, damn him. I hated that I didn't know the answer.

Melas walked me to Grandma's door. There was no romance in it—just business.

And Xander.

He'd materialized when we left our table. On my own dime I'd ordered him a chunk of *moussaka* and a piece of *galaktobouriko*. Melas had offered to pay for that, too, but I'd refused. Grandma's henchman had nodded his thanks. At least that's what I assumed the nod was all about.

"No time like the present," Melas said. He walked me to my room, pulled something out of his pocket.

I squinted at the stuff in his hand. A tiny nest of wires and plastic doohickeys was going to save my butt and bacon?

"That's it?"

"What did you expect?"

"Something bigger, flashier. Movie-grade stuff."

He laughed and picked up my phone. In a flash he had the back off and the guts splayed on my bed.

"What if he's watching you wire me up?"

Grandma's voice filtered down the hallway. It didn't have far to go. "That door better stay open."

"It's as open as it gets, *Kyria* Makri," Melas called out.

"I like you, Nikos. It would make me sad to burn you."

"Not as sad as it would make me," he muttered. He glanced up, winked at me.

There's something decadent about watching a man like Melas work with his hands, even when ogling is supposed to be off-limits. Maybe especially then. It's the whole forbidden fruit thing. That one piece of candy you can't have is ten times more delicious than the gummy bears melting in your pocket. It was hard to believe he was on the good side, because the man looked pure bad boy, the kind of man who's seen a lot of beds that weren't his.

"What exactly are you doing? The phone already has GPS."

"Backup. What if the phone's off?"

"The NSA can track a phone even if it's switched off. Allegedly."

"NSA?"

"National Security Agency."

"I'm not the NSA. I'm one guy." He snapped the phone back together, turned it on. "I'm also installing an app that can monitor your calls and texts."

"No way. What for?"

"What if he calls or texts?"

"Why would he do that?"

He grinned. "You never know."

"Cretin. You just want to listen in on my calls."

"Why would I want that?"

"Because you're a creep? I don't know."

"I don't care about your personal calls," he said. "But I do care about keeping you alive. Where's the wall socket?"

"No spy toys," Grandma called out. "Your spy toys will not work inside my house."

"Ears like a hound," I said. "Except when it suits her."

"My mother's the same way," he whispered.

"I will tell her you said that," Grandma said.

After a brief and mutual eye-rolling, I pointed him toward the lone outlet. Whether Grandma was right or not, he got to work wiring my room for professional eavesdropping.

"Do you think he'll come back here again?"

He shrugged. "I wouldn't rule it out. Hubris, remember?" He drew something out of his pocket, dumped it in my hand. A tiny velvet-covered box; the magical kind, with the power to make a woman smile, cry, or run away screaming.

Not me: I gave it the hairy eyeball.

"Don't you think this is too soon? We only went on one not-date."

"Open it."

Inside was a simple gold cross, a pendant with a matching gold chain threaded through its top loop.

"Pretty," I said. "I have one at home just like it in silver." You can't escape them if you've been baptized Greek Orthodox.

"This one is special." He lifted the necklace off its plush bed and did a *turn around* movement with his finger. One-handed, I swept my hair out of his way. Yes, I noticed how he lingered way too long on my collarbone, and goosebumps flocked to my skin as he fiddled with the clasp.

"It's a transmitter."

"What, no tape recorder strapped to my waist?"

He laughed, sat the box on the bedside table. "Me or one of my guys will be shadowing you twenty-four-seven. You won't see us, you won't hear us, but we'll be there. You need help, just say so. We'll hear it."

"What exactly do you want me to do?"

"Whatever you want. Do what's normal for you."

When I laughed it sounded like a cat hawking up a hairball. "Nothing about any of this is normal for me."

"So do what's normal for a tourist. Go sightseeing. Charbroil on the beach."

"Maybe the Baptist won't come after me. If he used to be one of you he'll know your tricks."

"He'll come. But I'll be there."

"What happens after? If you got orders not to bring him in last time, what's to stop them this time?"

"He was only a suspect last time."

This time he'd be the perpetrator. He didn't have to say it—I knew it in my bones, and also in my feet because they wanted to run.

"What about the guy or guys up the ladder? They won't like you stopping their buddy."

"One problem at a time." He pulled out his phone, scrolled through his messages. "Got to get moving."

"Who's my babysitter tonight?"

"Your grandmother's guys are on high alert. Xander's gonna be my ears and eyes."

"The mute guy. Great choice."

"He's almost as good as me. We were in the army together. The man can fight. He can do what needs doing."

Chapter 18

SLEEPLESS NIGHT. Greece cooled down, but the air, for me, stayed hot and confining. This was what it was like to be a cupcake in a too-high oven. Outside I could hear water licking the sides of the pool as someone did laps.

Not Xander. He was indoors, Kat-sitting. "I can't sleep," I whispered, wondering if he'd dozed off inside his cupboard.

There was movement in the kitchen.

Five minutes later a soft knock, then my door opened. Xander sat a mug on the bedside table, then he was gone.

I took a sip. Hot chocolate. Not ideal mid-summer, but it was sweet and delicious and so thoughtful that suddenly I had grit in my eyes. They sprang a tiny, damp leak. "No cookies?"

There was a snort outside my door. Apparently the hospitality service around here was drinks only. Good to know.

Tears brushed aside, I sat up, held the cup between my hands like I did in the old days when the weather was cold and I was a lot shorter.

"Thank you," I said, knowing he could hear me. "You know, I was hoping to die of old age, preferably surrounded by a loving family, who wouldn't be just waiting to shake the loose change out of my pockets. I'd have maybe three kids and a dozen or so grandkids, and maybe a couple of great-grandkids by then. And they'd all like me because I'm cool and awesome. What's your family like?" The next sip went down as easy as the first. "Do you even have a family? I suppose you do—everyone has a family of some sort, even if it's deranged and dysfunctional. Unless you don't, in which case I'm really sorry for bringing it up. That's thoughtless of me.

Another sip; more like a slurp, really.

"Well, looks like I'm probably going to die a lot sooner than old age. I should probably write a will or something. Dad can have everything. Anything he doesn't want can go to those sad puppies on TV. Do they have those here?"

I talked for a while, about nothing mostly. If any of it registered, he never did say. But I imagined him in his cupboard, head leaning against the wall. And I imagined that my words inspired him to *want* to share a conversation, even if he couldn't.

Morning came and I almost missed it. I scraped myself out of bed just before noon, flung the shutters wide. Grandma's gardenias were showing off and their perfume had drowned out everything else—which was fine with me. This was the life, I thought.

Then I remembered a serial-killing former cop wanted me dead and Dad was still missing, presumed kidnapped. That was like a bucket of cold water in the kisser.

I shoved my feet into slippers and shuffled into the kitchen, yawning. Nobody home except little ol' me.

Party time.

I went all out with coffee *and* cookies. There was nobody around to tell me I couldn't eat cookies for breakfast, so why not? It was almost lunchtime anyway, and therefore respectably past the no-cookies zone. I cleaned up my mess, squeezed into my new bikini, threw a sundress over the top, stuffed my beach bag, and trotted off to find a car. If Grandma was down with Melas's plan someone would pony up a vehicle, with her blessing.

Sure enough, there was a car waiting. A drop-top VW Beetle in a lemony shade of yellow. A couple of cousins were leaning against the limo smoking. When they saw me they jumped to attention and crushed their cigarettes under their heels.

"I saw nothing," I said.

They relaxed, lit up fresh cigarettes. "The keys are in the car," one of them said. I gave him a thumbs-up.

The Beetle still had that new-car smell. The seats were leather, the sound system fancy. A wave of nostalgia flattened me. I missed my Jeep. It smelled like me. It smelled like home. Still, I wasn't about to look a gift car in the tail pipe.

"Off we go," I said into the gold cross. The guard was nose down in his cell phone as I passed the guardhouse, but he waved anyway. I took the road down to Volos, then cut across to the beach I knew. The Beetle was a sweet ride. It hugged the corners and kept to the posted speed limits, much to the chagrin of the drivers on my curved tail. I blasted some 1980's *Motley Crue* for fun.

Penka was on her stoop looking ghettorific—if Bulgaria and Greece even had ghettos. Somehow she'd squeezed herself into a red tank top and persuaded it to be a dress. Her powers of persuasion were mighty. I stood back a few feet in case the whole contraption snapped and I lost an eye.

"Oh." She lit up a new cigarette. "It is you. What you want?"

"I'm on my way to the beach, figured I'd say hello. Where's Tasha?"

"Busy. She eat dick for money."

My stomach growled. "I had cookies. They're not filling either—not unless you eat a bunch."

"Is just like dick then."

I'd have to trust her on that one. I was a one-at-a-time kind of woman. I sat down next to her, tried to look like I wasn't a customer or a co-worker.

"How's business?" I asked.

"Terrible. You?"

"Still unemployed."

My phone buzzed. Incoming text from Melas.

Jesus Christ, what are you doing?

Hanging out with my friend.

"Boyfriend?" she asked.

"More like a pain in the ass."

She shrugged. "Is okay once you get used to it."

Something told me we weren't having the same conversation. "He's a cop."

"And you are Baboulas's granddaughter?" She laughed. "You have big problem, America."

"Tell me about it," I muttered.

The sun kicked me in the face for a few minutes and I let it. If things went wonky I wanted to die with some color on my cheeks. My phone buzzed again.

Your friend is a felon.

My family is the mob. I win.

No reply.

"What would you do if a psychopath was hunting you?"

She took a long, dramatic drag on her cigarette. "Leave country."

"I can't leave Greece."

"So stay and die."

"That's kind of the plan—minus the die part."

"Everybody dies. Who try to kill you?"

"A former cop."

Her head swiveled on its chunky stick. "I know who you mean. The man you ask about yesterday."

Another buzz.

Skasmos.

Melas was telling me to shut up. Too bad, I was kind of on a roll. "Do you know him?"

"Some people are not good to know."

"But you know him? Yesterday it sounded like you might."

She blew out a bedraggled plume of smoke. "I know him."

"Do you know where he is?"

"Try house."

I didn't know where he lived, but Melas did. That would have been the first place he looked. "Not home."

She shrugged. "I don't know. When Tasha come maybe she knows."

Yet another buzz. Jeez. This eavesdropping thing was already getting old fast.

Tasha's dead.

Shit. Shit. Shiiiiiiit. I went hot. I went cold. I went halfway crazy. It was bad enough when strangers pulled on their pine overcoats, but it was terrifying when it was people I knew.

My hands shook. *You sure*?

Russian. Small-time sisa dealer. Found this morning. Washed up on beach in Kala Nera.

Kala Nera. A small village ten minutes east of where I was sitting.

"When did you last see Tasha?" My voice wobbled out.

"Why?"

Small headshake. "Just curious."

She snatched the phone out of my hand, took herself a good look. "Stupid *coochka*! What did I say to her? I said, Put your *putka* away, do not sell." Under the baked-on tan she was the color of hotel sheets, but I had to hand it to her, she gave good steely veneer. With that kind of composure she could be a Brazilian waxer.

"You okay?" Because me, I wasn't all that okay. In fact, ice water was sluicing around in my veins and those cookies were clawing their way up my throat.

She dumped the phone in my lap. "I am Bulgarian. I eat some tomato, some cheese, and the world will be good again. A hungry bear cannot dance."

Looked to me like she went light on the tomato, heavy on the dairy.

"There are worse things you could eat."

"That is why I have cigarette. It burns fat." She looked me up and down. "You want cigarette?"

Surely the cookies hadn't worked that fast. "I'll pass, but thanks."

"Is your funeral." Then she burst into big, wet, ugly tears. Her dam had exploded, and there I was not even remotely Dutch, without a place I'd be willing to stick a finger.

My arm went around her shoulders, gave her a squeeze.

"It'll be okay," I said, lying my butt off. A friend dies, a mother, nothing is okay again. Life afterward is a crude, threadbare quilt that doesn't quite cover pain's feet or elbows. Sharp, shiny hurts poked out when you least expected them to. But I said it because that's what you say.

I texted Melas.

Was it him?

There was a long pause, or maybe a short pause that had been stretched to fill a larger gap.

We think so.

I thought for a minute.

Where are you? I asked.

The beach was packed. The streets were clogged with cars and other fast moving traffic. Every person in sight was in various stages of undress. I scanned the parked cars and the crowd for Melas, but couldn't spot him.

Around.

Was she an informant?

Yes.

I pocked my phone. More bad news was the last thing I wanted.

"She was bad friend," Penka said between fresh outpourings.

"Is there anything I can do to help? Can I get you anything?"

"No." She stopped crying long enough to light a new cigarette. "Maybe ice cream."

I jogged across the street to the beachside pavilion, where an old guy was snatching money, slapping drinks and ice creams on the counter. With that stony face of his he could have been a contender for Mount Rushmore. I told him what I wanted, gave him his money, and he grunted his goodbye.

Penka balanced her cigarette on the porch, relived me of the ice cream. She pulled off the cardboard top and went mining with the tiny pink plastic spoon.

"Did Tasha have any family?"

"Dead."

Poor Tasha. Sounded like Greece was her last resort and it had failed her, too.

"Who did she work for?"

"Same as me. Baby Dimitri. You know him?"

Ugh. Him again. "I know him and his pyromaniac friend."

"That is Laki."

Holy sarcasm, Batman! "What's lucky about it?"

"That is his name. Laki. If you are clever you will stay away from that one, too. The crazy man does not get tired—he only sweats."

"Do me a favor," I said. "If the police try pressuring you to be an informant, don't do it, at least not until they've caught this guy."

"Never would I do that. Penka says nothing." She zipped her lips and stowed the invisible key in her cleavage. No one would ever find it there.

I hoped she was telling the truth. Otherwise it could get her killed.

I jumped in my car, zoomed up the road to Baby Dimitri's shoe and

souvenir shop. Today, the Godfather of Resort Footwear and Collectibles was sitting outside with his arsonist sidekick. No sign of the third guy. No table between them, just two chairs facing the road and the sea. Laki grinned when he saw me, flicking open his Zippo-style lighter. But me, I was smart. I'd parked one block over and hoofed it the rest of the way. Once again, Baby Dimitri looked like something coughed out of Florida's lung, in his white shoes and precision-creased trousers.

"Look who it is. Little Katerina Makris, with an s."

"Rumor is you lost a dealer today."

Baby Dimitri shrugged. "Eh, I'll find another one. Lots of people looking for work these days."

"The Baptist drowned her like he drowns all the others. And it sounds to me like he'll keep killing his way up the ladder until he gets to you."

He snorted. "Tasha was an informant, the stupid *skeela*. She open her mouth and blab, blab, blab to the police. You think I want somebody like that working for me?"

"How did you know she was an informant?"

"Why else would he kill her? Before he used to kill just us—now he kills informants."

"What happens when he runs out of informants? The guy likes to kill. It makes him all cheerful and happy. George Kefalas is dead. Christos Koulouris is dead."

Laki flicked his lighter open-closed-open, toying with it the way old Greek guys usually toyed with *komboloi*—a.k.a. worry beads. "If he comes I make fire on his face."

The thing I liked about mobsters is that these guys didn't have issues. At all.

"You guys never played rock, paper, scissors?" I asked. "Water beats fire every time."

Was it just me or did Laki's smirk droop? That many wrinkles it was hard to say.

Baby Dimitri folded his arms. "They say the Baptist gave you a number, that he wants you dead, too."

"They talk a lot."

"It is Greece, what do you expect? Everybody knows everything."

"I'm not an informant, if that's what you think."

The two men looked at each other. Laughed. "Why do you think he wants you, eh? Because you are a pretty piece of ass? Plenty of pretty ass over there on the beach. Why you think my shop is so close to the water?" Baby Dimitri leaned forward, beckoned to me. Like that was going to work. When he realized I wasn't going to jump to his command, he waved his hand and leaned back in his chair. "Let me

tell you something I think nobody has told you. I remember the Baptist when he was a shiny, new policeman. He was a cocky son of the bitch even then. We all talked, we all knew he was going to be a big problem. A sharp pain in our asses. He was always sniffing around, asking questions smarter men did not ask. A funny thing—he and your father were in school together. I bet you did not know that."

I felt like I'd been thrown into a Build-a-Bear store, without a clue how the whole process worked. Just when I thought I had my bear stuffed, I realized its legs were still hollow.

"I knew it," I lied.

"No, you didn't."

"Okay, maybe I didn't. Go on."

"Maybe your father was an asshole in school, maybe he stole the boy's *tiropita* money—who knows?" He shrugged, palms up. "I don't know. But he hated your father. And he hated him even more when they were both grown up and on different sides. During the early 80s, the Kefalas family approached your grandmother to join them in pressuring the Prime Minister, Andreas Papandreou, out of office. Kefalas was a capitalist, a businessman, and Papandreou was a socialist. He was bad for Kefalas's business. Your grandmother is many things, but always she is for the people. What's good for the people is good for her and the Family. Back then, Papandreou was good for the people, so she told Kefalas 'No.' Kefalas was not happy. He sent a cousin to kill her as she was coming out of church, but your father was faster. He killed Kefalas's cousin. Lots of witnesses, all from Makria. But nobody would say a word to the police. One of the policemen was your friend, the Baptist. It drove him crazy that your father—a man he hated—committed a murder in daylight and nobody would speak out against him."

"Why didn't they? Were they scared?"

Because I'd be scared but I like to think I'd do the right thing.

He tapped his noggin with one finger. "Because the people they remember what this country was like in the 60s and 70s, when Papadopoulos and the other colonels were running Greece. It was an ugly time in Greece's history, but my Family, your grandmother's Family, and some of the others, we helped people who were targeted by the regime. We helped people escape. We fed their families. Hid them when the government came to take them away. Greeks are loyal. They remember who helped them. Kefalas—" He shook his head, mouth sour. "—he never helped them. The police did not help them. Your grandmother, she helped them. To her they were loyal; they saw nothing, said nothing."

"And then my father ran away."

Two palms up. "And then he ran away to America to avoid the

Baptist and the rest of the police."

"So …" My mind drifted toward the water. It seemed like a nice place to do the mental gyrations and calculations. When it came back with its wretched answer, I said, "The Baptist wants me as bait to get to my father, doesn't he?"

He clapped. "Give the girl a free pair of shoes, or maybe one of those little statues with a huge *poutsa*."

Laki left his chair, went inside, returned moments later with a squat wooden statue of a crouching man with a chin-skimming meatsicle. He thrust it into my hands.

"Wow," I said. "I'd love to take it home with me, but I can't accept gifts from crazy people."

"Keep it," Baby Dimitri said. "They are cheap."

I glanced inside, took stock of the goods. "How about you swap the figurine for a bag of marbles?"

"Marbles? What for do you want marbles?"

"I like marbles."

"Keep the statue. Laki, give her the marbles, too."

"I'd be happy to pay for them."

He made a *tst* sound. "Take the marbles."

Like I was born yesterday. "What's it going to cost me?"

His lips peeled back from his teeth. Big scary smile on the wolf's face. "We will see."

Great. I was double bait. Everyone wanted me to be a critical part of their plan. I plopped down on the pebbled beach with my bag of marbles in one hand, Woody Woodenpecker in the other. "I want a time machine," I said. "Because this really sucks."

I looked at my phone. No text messages.

I guess Melas thought this sucked, too.

Detective Melas pulled up behind me when I stopped outside the compound's garage. He was carrying flowers and a couple of paper-wrapped *souvlakia*.

"Please tell me one of those is for me," I said.

"I don't know, I could eat two."

"I could have you killed like this." I snapped my fingers. "At least I think I could."

He slapped one into my hand. "Don't think this means I'm susceptible to bribes. You're getting it because I like your ass."

The flower arrangement was big and bushy. Lots of roses and carnations, strawflowers filling out the gaps. "And those?"

"They're for your grandmother, for letting me use her granddaughter."

The expression on his face said he was serious. Lucky for him, his words contradicted his face. Or so I hoped.

Melas fell into step beside me. The compound was hopping. Family all over the place. Kids diving into the pool while their mothers sat in clumps and chatted. Every so often, one of them would glance over at the children and screech an empty death threat.

Melas said, "Reminds me of my childhood."

I wondered if *she* was here, Melas's former lover and family snitch. There were a few mildly curious glances shot in our direction, and a lot of, "*Yia sou, Katerina*, *Nikos!*" going on, but none of the interest stuck.

"Any sign of our water-loving friend?" Melas asked.

"Not yet."

"What the devil were you doing chatting to criminals?"

"They're the only people I know here."

"Jesus," he said. "You need some regular friends."

"I'm not staying long enough to make friends. As soon as I find Dad I'm going home, back to my life. Do me a favor," I said. "Don't ask Penka to be an informant, at least not until the Baptist is locked up."

"That's not how it works."

I gave him a look loaded with sharp metal objects.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. But a woman's character is her fate."

"Who said that? Because it doesn't sound like you."

"Heraclitus."

I snorted. "I wouldn't have picked you for a philosopher."

"I'm not. That's why I'm borrowing someone else's words."

We fell silent for a moment, me pondering his hidden depths and his penchant for obscure philosophers. After Mom died and I flipped off God for spending more time worrying about Kardashians than my family, I turned to philosophy for answers. It's also possible I lit candles and offered my soul to anything out there that could bring my mother back as something other than an oozing zombie. But mostly I turned to long-dead philosophers and their ideas about life and death. Which is why my next question was: "Did you know about my father and his history with the Baptist?" and not, "Who the heck is Heraclitus?"

"I remember hearing about the attempted hit on your grandmother."

"Does he have a real name?"

"Yes."

I didn't know the Greek word for 'elucidate,' so I just let my eyebrow do the asking.

"Forget it," he said. "The less you know the better off you'll be."

We had reached Grandma's hovel. She was in her garden, bent over a red tub of gardenias, a mile of dimpled and sagging thigh showing. Papou was keeping her company, cleaning his fingernails with what looked like a tenpenny nail.

Melas did the gentlemanly thing and averted his eyes.

"Are you checking out my *kolos*, Nikos?" she asked without turning around. The woman truly did have eyes in the back of her head.

Papou snorted. "Even a blind man wouldn't want to look at your *kolos* these days."

Grandma straightened up, one hand pressed to her lower back. "Xander? Takis?" she called out over the fence. "Take him to the pool. If he says a word, push him in."

The old man puckered up and smacked his lips. "At last! Peace!"

"Bad day?" I asked her.

"It is always a bad day when the police use my granddaughter for bait." She pointed to the flowers. "Are those for me? Because I think my day would be better if you brought me flowers."

Melas handed them over. She took a long sniff then passed them to me. "Put them in the kitchen."

Melas followed me inside. I sat the flowers in the center of the kitchen table. The tablecloth was plastic—no chance of water marks. I grabbed two plates and a handful of napkins. I poured cold water into two glasses.

Then I ripped into my souvlaki like a rabid wolverine. Melas watched me sink my teeth into the meat-stuffed pita, his expression pained.

"Jesus Christ."

I swallowed. "That bad?"

"That good."

I sank my teeth in again, hamming it up Meg Ryan-style.

"Keep it up," he said, "and I'll violate all of your grandmother's rules."

I tried not to blush. It happened anyway.

"So what do you think? Am I bait times two? Does the Baptist want to use me or kill me?"

"Both. Use you then kill you."

"What happens now?"

"Keep doing what you're doing." He kicked back and grinned. "While I sit here and watch."

We ate, and I cleaned up while he went out to talk to my grandmother. By the time I was done he was gone.

"He left already?"

"Nikos went to see his parents," Grandma said. "They live in Makria."

"So you know them?"

"I know everybody in Makria."

I remembered the plate I still hadn't returned. "I've got one of his mother's plates."

"Not for long. Nobody takes her plates."

I was afraid of that.

Chapter 19

THE SIRENS WENT off just after midnight, ripping me out of a dream where Melas had been violating my grandmother's rules—repeatedly and with vigor. I leaped out of bed, bolted into the hallway, heart hammering against my ribcage.

Not all the extreme heart palpitating was the alarm's fault. Grandma was charging toward down the hall with a shotgun in her hands, the business end pointed right at me.

That unnatural screeching? Me.

"Behind me, Katerina" she hollered. The front door banged open and Aunt Rita pushed her way in with the same cannon she'd along brought to rescue me from Melas's old firehouse.

"Where is Xander?" Grandma demanded.

Aunt Rita pointed up.

The three of us burst through the door. Beside us, something—or someone—hit the concrete and quickly unraveled to its full height.

Xander. He looked like he was here to put the hurt on anyone who needed serious hurting. No lie: yeah, I was a panting, sweating, close-to-wetting-myself mess, but his intensity was kind of hot.

Where was I?

Panicking, that's right.

Footsteps pounding ground everywhere, beneath the scream of the alarm. No fire, no smoke, no oncoming tornado, no Unidentified Flying Objects waving *To Serve Man* in our faces. So what the hell was going on?

That blabby big-mouthed voice inside me said, her voice pure valley girl attitude, that this was what was supposed to happen when someone unauthorized stepped onto the family's property.

Grandma barked orders. "Xander, Rita, into the cellar with Katerina!"

"Wait—what? No!" We couldn't leave her up here alone.

Xander's arm snapped like a steel band around my chest, holding me tight against him. Aunt Rita fell into position beside him, and the ground beneath us began to fall away. We sank maybe seven or eight feet, deeper than a grave, then stopped. All three of us stepped off the concrete pad—although it's more accurate to say Xander stepped me off—into the darkness. The floor was cool, the air dry and lightly refrigerated. The concrete square jumped back into position, ready to fool intruders.

Someone had broken the perimeter, and my grandmother was up there fighting. It wasn't right. We should be up there, too. What if she got shot—or worse? The universe had dangled more family in front of me and now it wanted to yank it away? Not cool.

"I'm going back up."

I didn't know how, but I was going.

Except I wasn't, because Xander had me by the scruff of the pajamas, and I was doing that cartoon air-walking thing. Again. It was becoming a habit I wanted to quit.

Bulbs flicked on. Bright white light flooded the cellar.

I blinked. Could anyone really call this is a cellar?

It was more like the control room of a giant robot or battleship. Directly in front of me was a wall of monitors—one large, at least two dozen smaller—all switched on. Compound front, compound back and sides, pool, the house above, hallways, and several places I didn't recognize.

Oh, and several police stations, including the one I'd visited twice already.

I'd bet Detective Melas didn't know about this room.

Laptops booted up along a row of tables. An office chair sat in front of each. The captain's chair rose up behind them on a shortish pedestal. It had a footrest and a side pocket, currently filled with yarn and knitting needles. On each side of the room were two doors—four total. None were marked.

Aunt Rita pointed to each one. "Bathrooms, kitchen, sleeping quarters."

"What's behind the other one?"

"Warehouse. Food, water, weapons. Whatever people keep in warehouses."

"What's that big, red button?" I asked.

The big, red button was under a see-through dome on a control panel in front of the captain's chair.

"Don't touch the button," Aunt Rita said. "Nobody touches the button."

"What does it do?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. All I know is not to touch it."

"I bet it does something terrible," I said. "Red buttons usually do."

"If you want to make Baboulas very angry, push it."

"I won't push it." My inner child wanted to—desperately—but I smacked her fingers.

My aunt slid behind one of the computers and began clacking frantically, at a nail-breaking pace. To her credit, not one of them snapped.

"It's an intruder," she said. "He or she is out the front by the

garage."

She tapped a key and the front of the compound came into focus in that one big center screen. She tapped another key and the camera moved. There was my shiny, new yellow Beetle. And there was Detective Melas with his hands up, his expression somewhere between pissed and contrite.

They had him surrounded, dozens of guns pointing in his direction. Grandma marched into the circle, looking like the fearsome creature featured in Dad's bedtime stories.

Just kidding. She looked like a little old grandma. With a huge gun.

"Nikos," she said, "what are you doing? It is the middle of the night. Time for respectable people to be sleeping. Why did you wake me up?"

"I was visiting my parents—"

"You are a good son, but your parents do not live under Katerina's car."

Aunt Rita swung around, eyebrows raised.

"Don't look at me," I said.

"It is rude to slide under a woman's undercarriage without permission," my grandmother continued, unaware that several feet beneath the ground she'd been interrupted.

One of Melas's hands dropped. He held it out, palm up. Showed her a small black box.

"Transmitter," he said. "I couldn't put it on her car until I knew what she was driving. I forgot earlier so I figured I'd do it on the way home."

"Wait," I said. "Why was my car out there? Shouldn't it be in the garage?"

Not Melas, though. He didn't find that strange at all.

"You guys left my car out there on purpose, didn't you?"

"Maybe," my aunt said. I looked at Xander, but he was busy checking out the other monitors.

"And where's the guard? Melas shouldn't have been able to march right past the guard—right?"

"That's a good question." She hit a few keys and another scene came up. A view of the guardhouse. It was empty now, but she hit rewind. When she stopped, the guard had his smartphone in one hand and Mr. Winky in the other.

"Hmm," my aunt said. It was a terrible sort of *hmm*, the kind one hears just before a judge sends a man to the firing squad.

"Okay," I said. "Nothing to see here. Just a cop doing something stupid that almost turned him into a human sieve, and a frisky guard. In his defense, it is the middle of the night, and there's a limit to how

much Solitaire a person can play on their phone." I headed towards the square in the ceiling, expecting the way in to double as the way out.

Maybe it did, but not tonight.

"Xander," Aunt Rita said, "can you take Katerina back upstairs, please?" She did a *come here* motion with both hands, so I trotted over. She dropped a kiss on each of my cheeks. "Get some good sleep, eh?"

"You, too."

"Katerina?" Not my aunt this time. It was Grandma, and she was looking up at the camera. "Katerina, are you wearing shoes?"

I wiggled my naked toes. And even though she couldn't hear me I said, "Yes."

The way out was through the galley kitchen (shiny, modern appliances) and along a narrow low-ceiling corridor that soon split in two. When we found ourselves at the crossroads, Xander veered to the left. I couldn't see the end point of the right corridor. Greece and Grandma were good at dangling mysteries under my nose; I wanted to know where the path led. Maybe the dungeon Aunt Rita mentioned. But for now, I had to be satisfied with discovering what was behind door one.

And it was … drumroll …

A ladder, of sorts.

Metal bars fastened to the concrete. At the top was a steel trapdoor with a keypad set into the side.

Xander was up there in a flash. I tried not to notice how great his butt looked in black cargo pants, or how climbing a ladder did amazing things to his substantial arms. It felt vaguely sleazy to go from a tripleX-rated dream featuring Melas to leering at Xander's ass. Luckily I could blame the flushed cheeks I was sporting on Melas's nocturnal shenanigans—of the clean kind—and no one would be any the wiser.

He tapped a sequence of numbers into the keypad. Waited for the click. Then punched the metal slab with his palm. It swung up and stayed open. He vanished through the hole, then his head appeared, followed by his hand.

I was pretty sure that was the international signal of, '*It's safe. Come on up*.' So I scrambled up the ladder, glad there was no one below to gawk at my lightly pajama'd rear.

When I reached the top, he hauled me up the rest of the way, depositing me on a cool marble floor. The lights were off, but I could make out the shape of a queen-sized bed and a big-screen TV.

"Where are we?"

I think I asked Xander questions hoping that one day he'd answer. When I was a kid, I overdosed on old episodes of *Mister Ed*. I spent weeks sitting in front of my hamster's cage, begging him to talk. I even went so far as to set up our video camera in my room, hoping to capture him in an unguarded moment. We wound up with nothing but hours and hours of Tootsie hauling ass on his wheel.

Xander was like Tootsie on that plastic wheel.

He flipped the switch on a lamp. Pale yellow light chased the shadows into the corners, but it performed its task in an amiable way.

The bed was big. The sheets were bachelor-style black. The furniture was decent quality, and the computer on the desk was a sleek MacBook Pro. No pictures. No art. Nothing on the walls except off-white paint. Probably the paint had a fancy name like *Handful o' Blanched Almonds* or *Winter in Beijing, Before All the Smog*. The room came with an en-suite, a small living room, and a kitchen, where a sleek steel refrigerator was quietly humming the same old cool song.

"Is this your place?"

He nodded once, then unlocked his front door and waited for me to take the hint. I was good with hints, and the adrenaline was rinsing away anyway, leaving me feeling like a balloon seven days past a birthday party. Somewhere out there was a waiting bed; it wanted me back.

His room turned out to be on the bottom floor of the compound, in the room closest to Grandma's house. Family and well-paid friends were trickling back to their beds. We exchanged 'Goodnights' as we passed each other, and I hoped they didn't hate me too much for the drama. Without meaning to I'd shaken up the family—and the Family—just by being here.

But they'd shaken up my life, too. Now we were all trying to contain the fizz.

I drove back to the beach, parked a ways down from where Penka was flipping through a magazine, when she wasn't selling Ritalin to moms. I couldn't see the Beetle from here, but it was wired out the wahzoo, thanks to Melas's midnight adventure. After everything died down my grandmother had grudgingly allowed him to stick his transmitter to my undercarriage.

Which—coincidentally—he also did in the dream I had afterward. Different chassis, though.

"Hey," I said.

The big Bulgarian drug dealer looked up like it was a chore. "What

you do here?"

"I don't have any friends in Greece. You're it."

"Not my problem."

"Who said it was a problem?" I asked how she was doing, under the circumstances.

She grunted. "I no complain. You should go. I never sell drugs with you sitting here. You look too clean. Come back when you look like junkie."

"I've seen your customers. They look even cleaner than me."

"They dress clean, yes, but they want a dealer to look like junkie whore. It makes them feel better about themselves."

I guess that made sense. "Selling drugs will get you killed. Have you thought about handing in your notice?"

"Life gets you killed."

Couldn't argue with that. Life came with a guaranteed death sentence. Some of us just put it off longer than others, that's all. That's what those long-dead philosophers taught me.

"When's Tasha's funeral?"

"Day after tomorrow. I must find belt for her. Is Russian funeral tradition."

I jotted down my cell number, passed it to her. "If you need company, call me and I'll come with you. Unless I'm dead by then."

"A good chance you will be."

"Most likely," I admitted.

Yesterday I'd never made it to the beach, so this morning I made good on my promise. I unrolled my mat, stripped off, and let the sun broil me for a couple of hours—sixty good minutes on each side—while I watched kids hauling themselves onto the brightly colored boats. The boats' owners didn't go for any of those sissy pastels or cool whites, they went big and bold and blinding. Stare at any of these boats too long and you were going to fry those rods and cones. Maybe it was a new, innovative way of fishing: stun the seafood out of the sea.

Watching the kids dive made me want to be young again. I wanted to be in that water, with my parents standing on the pebbles, screeching my name.

The hole in my heart widened another inch.

My phone rang. It was Melas.

"What's with the dental floss?"

"Huh?" The sun had me feeling woozy and not entirely capable of forming coherent sentences.

"That thing you probably call a bikini."

"What about it?"

"You're almost naked."

"Who died and made you the fashion police?" I hung up, slightly peeved.

The sun's slap didn't feel like much now, but I was going to be praying to major and minor gods later to take away the pain, so I packed up my show and took it on the road, all the way back to the Beetle. I jumped in, hit the button to seal the lid on this baby, then froze when I glanced in the rearview mirror.

"Katerina Makris," the Baptist said, pulling himself upright. "The prodigal son's brat."

Clank, click went the top.

Chapter 20

"I WATCHED you talking to the Bulgarian pig. We had a friend in common, did she tell you?"

"She didn't tell me anything."

"Liar. But least you are a bad liar, not like your father."

Was Melas listening? Was anybody? The cross felt like a brick around my neck. I closed my eyes, tried to force my heart to its normal non-deafening speed. When I opened them, I resisted the urge to grab the delicate gold pendant and scream for help. What was it with men? Whether they wanted to bone you or kill you, they always preferred to come at you from behind.

I kept my breathing slow and even, so when I spoke it barely sounded like I was one heartbeat away from wetting myself. "What did you have against Tasha?"

"Nothing. She was another piece of garbage that's all, and I am a garbageman."

"And my father?"

"Worse than garbage. He's shit."

"What did he do to you?"

He showed a mile of teeth in the mirror. I had flashbacks to the first time I saw *Jaws 3*. Who recovers from that? Nobody, that's who.

"Doesn't matter. What matters is what I'm going to do to you—and to him when he comes for you."

"He won't come."

"He will come. I will have you, I already have his girlfriend—"

"Who?"

"His girlfriend."

Dina. I'd forgotten about her. "You took Dina? Is she okay?"

He looked at his watch. "We're going to have fun, you and me and Dina. Maybe I'll fuck her while she's drowning. Feels good to shoot a load into a dying—"

"Ugh. Jeez. What is wrong with you?" My fingers were tracing the side of the seat, feeling out the levers. I took a chance and yanked the top lever, slamming my weight backwards. It was obvious at this point that I had to be my own cavalry. Melas and his merry band of policemen were officially slashed off my Christmas card list.

The former cop cried out as the leather seat crashed into his face. He recovered fast—too fast. His fist was quick and accurate. It nailed my ear, punching me into the car door. His second shot cracked my

nose sideways, and I saw the light end of a dark tunnel. He tried to bail, but I wasn't about to move until my hands were exactly where I wanted them: in my bag, on my slingshot, on the bag of marbles from Baby Dimitri's shop. Then I leaned forward and let him shove me into the wheel so he could bolt. I wanted to cry and bleed in peace, but this wasn't the time for dallying. I jumped out behind him, loaded up the slingshot, stretched the elastic to its limits.

What was it gun experts always said?

Fire on the exhale.

I did that now. The marble shot out of the cradle. It nailed him in the shoulder, and he spun around momentarily. What can I say, I was a slingshot virgin and he was running. He howled and spat out a string of curse words, stumbling in the street. A taxicab almost sideswiped him. The driver leaned on his horn before zipping away. People were looking, but they weren't sure what they were seeing.

And me, I was leaning against the yellow Beetle, clutching the cross, making threats against local law enforcement. Really though, they had nothing to fear unless I suddenly encountered a boulder, a time machine, a donkey, and their mothers in the same afternoon.

I got back in my car, locked all the doors, and then with shaking hands and Jell-O for a brain, drove back towards Grandma's house, hoping I wouldn't encounter any more wolves along the way.

Halfway up the mountain I pulled over. The road had no shoulder, so I had to make do with the parking lot outside a microscopic village. From here it looked charming, and I wasn't the only one who thought so: two tour buses pulled up behind me. The doors opened and tourists flooded out.

I hoped they wouldn't notice me sitting in my car, moping up my own blood with a beach towel. My teeth were chattering, making little *clack-clack* noises in my head.

"Where is my plate?"

"Argh!"

The woman had snuck up on me. She was a hundred pounds of disdain, tucked into a floral knee-length dress. Her hair was a helmet, but I didn't think it was hairspray keeping it in place. From the look of her she rose every morning and commanded her locks to stand still until she gave them permission to move.

Plate? What plate?

I sat in the Beetle, hands on the wheel, and tried to think. Then it sank in. The memory of me chowing down a plateful of cold moussaka as Aunt Rita and I fled Melas's home.

"Kyria Mela?" Mrs. Mela. No s on account of her being a woman—unless she was persnickety like me. My grandmother was a mobster, but this woman looked like she'd mess you up hard and leave you for starving cats, without a second thought.

"The coffee cup told me we would meet, and now here we are. The coffee cup is never wrong."

This was turning *Twin Peaks* fast. The only thing she was missing was a log and a sinister message about the owls not being what they seemed.

"I like coffee," I said feebly.

"Then you will come for coffee soon. Bring my plate."

She jumped into an ancient Peugeot and zoomed away.

I sat there blinking for a moment, at least with one eye. My right eye was puffing up fast. My nose and ear had tapped direct lines to my brain—wasn't like they had far to go—and both were screaming for icepacks and a handful of ibuprofen.

My phone bonged. Incoming text.

Jesus. Was that my mother?

Melas, that rotten bastard. Where was he when there was a psychopath in my backseat?

I typed with two furious thumbs, hoping the venom would seep through his screen and poison him. *I hate you*.

Hands back on the wheel. Shoulders square. Sunglasses on and covering some of the damage. I freed my ponytail and gave it a shake. That was my red ear and purpling cheek taken care of, provided I kept my head at a strange angle that was bound to make people go, 'Aww, look at the poor hunchback.'

Five minutes later, I was waving to the guard in the guardhouse. This one was focused on his surroundings, no smartphone in sight, his baloney pony fenced in his pants where it belonged. I stopped outside the compound's garage. Takis and Stavros were slouching against the wall, watching two of the younger cousins play *tavli*—a.k.a. backgammon—on the hood of a BMW.

They all stopped what they were doing to gawk at me getting out of the car.

"Why the blood?" Takis called out.

"Must be that time of the month," I said.

He looked confused. "But it is on your face."

"A psychopath punched me."

He shrugged. Probably a broken face was just another workday to these guys. "Who was it?"

Hands on hips. "Guess."

He and Stavros jumped to attention. "Where is that *malakas* Melas?" Takis demanded.

"That's a really great question," I said.

I stomped through the compound. Grandma was—predictably—baking. She glanced up before returning to the bowl.

"What happened to your face?"

"I tripped on an asshole."

"I have tripped on many assholes, but I never broke my face."

"The Baptist got in my back seat. We fought, and then we both kind of won."

She picked up the phone clinging to the wall. Stabbed one of the preset numbers. Said, in a voice reminiscent of Gandalf challenging the Balrog, "Bring Melas here."

Uh-oh.

The baking went forgotten as she reached under the sink for a clear bottle three-quarters full of pale blue liquid. No discernible label. Call me kooky, but I wasn't sure about whatever was inside the container.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Rubbing alcohol."

"Is that good for black eyes and broken noses?"

"It is good for everything. For everything else … vinegar. Between them you can cure anything."

"Pneumonia?"

"Anything."

"Ebola?"

"Anything."

"Death?"

She paused for a second. "Only God can raise a dead man."

"Yes, but does he do it with vinegar and rubbing alcohol?"

"You are just like your father." I wasn't sure if that was an endorsement or condemnation.

The gate creaked. High heels clicked. They were accompanied by the sound of Papou bitching about missing his daytime shows. "Mama?"

"In the kitchen," Grandma said.

Aunt Rita lifted the wheelchair and its passenger. She looked like a lady but she lifted like a man. Today she was a 1960s Bardot with a 1980s Bardot face. Short shorts and a ruffled off—the-shoulder top. Her shoes were tall wedges with ambition: they wanted to be skyscrapers someday.

Papou quit his whining when he saw my face. "She is supposed to be protected day and night."

Grandma rinsed a kitchen towel, then laid it to rest over the mixing bowl to stop the contents drying out. She pushed the bowl aside, then came to sit at the table with the rest of us. She poured the

alcohol on her fingers, dabbed it around my puffy eye. The fumes made me leak more tears.

"Yet this man climbed into her car and punched her face."

"Melas and his team?" he asked.

She gave him two palms up.

"Xander?"

"Gone to fetch Nikos," Grandma said. "I do not like this. Too much is happening that I cannot control."

"What's the plan when he gets here?" Aunt Rita asked.

"You know the rule, we do not kill policemen." She layered more rubbing alcohol on my sore bits. My face was enjoying the chill. "That is how it has always been. But he will have to go."

Behind the headache, an alarm went off in my brain. I tried talking some sense into the silly thing, but it was ignoring me. "Go where? You can't just get rid of him!"

"We will arrange for a transfer," Aunt Rita said. "His family is here, but he should have considered that before he let you get hurt. They will understand."

"I'm fine," I protested. "Honestly."

My phone beeped and bonged. Melas. I picked up.

"Why do you hate me?" he asked.

"Where are you?" My voice came out nasal and malformed.

"At the guardhouse."

"Not for long," I muttered and hung up.

Everyone was looking me. "Melas wanted to know why I hate him."

"Just say the word," Aunt Rita said. "We could send him to Turkey."

"His family's here. Doesn't that count for something? Imagine how his mother would feel. How did you feel when Dad left Greece?" I asked my grandmother.

Grandma's chair creaked as she stood. She put away the rubbing alcohol and washed her hands before opening the cupboard where her baking ingredients lived. She pulled out another bowl and placed it on the counter next to its sibling.

She said, "This is what I get for agreeing to Melas's plan."

"There is no other way to catch the Baptist," Papou said. "We have tried."

"You all know he's a former policeman, right? And that he's targeting informants?"

Everybody looked at me. Of course they knew. Great.

A thought popped into my head. All this bleeding and pain had rattled me, and I'd forgotten about Dad's ex. "He's got Dina," I said. "He said he's planning to use both of us as bait to catch my father."

Aunt Rita rolled her eyes. One set of Bambi lashes stuck to her brow. She peeled it off with two talons and stuck it on the back of her

hand for later. "That crazy *mouni*."

Grandma gave her a dirty look, for the language, mostly. "Your father will not come," she said. "How can he?"

"He thinks Dad is faking it."

She dumped flour into a bowl. Squirted vinegar. Pinched salt. Eyeballed a short pour of olive oil, then did the same with hot tap water.

Aunt Rita and Papou were silent. I decided to copy them. It seemed prudent under the circumstances.

She began to work the dough with her hands. "Katerina, I have a big problem—"

"Do you want us to go, Mama?" Aunt Rita asked.

"No. Stay right there. I want you here when Xander brings Melas. Katerina, this is my problem. I am old. I asked God, I talked to the Virgin Mary, I pleaded with Zeus and offered him some of the good-looking men in the family. But none of them will stop time for me. I am old and growing older by the minute. When I die there is no one who can run this family. I have no real underboss. An advisor I have, soldiers I have, a very good accountant—" She nodded to my aunt. "—that I have, too. Your uncle Kostas is busy running what will become his own Family in *Germania*. Your father was always meant to take over the business here. I sent him a letter telling him to come home and learn all the important things, so that when the time comes the Family would be his. And here I am now with no son and no underboss and no heir."

"What about you?" I asked my aunt.

"Honey, I'm too glamorous for anyone to take me seriously."

"They haven't seen you with a gun," I said. She blew me a kiss.

"Rita does not want the job," Grandma said.

I contemplated the impossible. "What if we don't find Dad?"

She looked at me, her hands working the dough. A lightbulb turned on in my head.

"No," I said. "Noooooo."

"There is no one else. Michail or you."

"I'm … I'm …"

One of the good guys. A heroine not a villain. I was a freaking debt collector, and when I went home I was going find another job, equally not-criminal.

"You are what?" she prompted me.

"I'm just a normal person. I can't run a criminal organization. I won't do it. I couldn't do what you do and still look at myself in the mirror without hating what I see. How do you sleep at night?"

Papou cackled, slapping his thigh. I hoped he wouldn't knock out his catheter. "You have met your match, Katerina," he said to my

grandmother. "Forget her father—this is the one. You sent her home and what did she do? She defied you and came back because she believed she was doing the right thing. She will not run away from a problem." He made a fist with one hand, slapped it with the other. "She is you, but with better legs."

I wished he'd stop beefing up my resume. I was in no way qualified to slide into the supervillain seat and run a crime syndicate. Not to mention the moral aspect. I was a fundamentally decent person. And I couldn't bake.

More footsteps. Two sets, both heavy and male. Melas walked in with Xander on his heels. Neither man looked happy.

"Nikos," Grandma said, still kneading the new dough. "Come stand over here beside me." She indicated with her eyes exactly where he should go. He did as she asked, then she said, "Look at Katerina. What do you see?"

Our gazes clashed, then his moved slightly to the right. "*Gamo tin mana sou*," he swore.

"Her mother is dead, so you cannot do that to her," Grandma said in a calm voice. "And today Katerina could have been dead, too."

"When?" he demanded. "How?"

Xander crouched beside me. With a distractingly warm hand he moved my chin this way and that. Then he went to the freezer, pulled out a chunk of frozen mystery meat. I hoped it was animal and not former foe.

"I already used rubbing alcohol," Grandma told him. "She will be fine."

The silent man ignored her. He pulled up a chair and sat beside me, holding the steak to my black and purple bits. The cold seeped in. The throbbing in my face and head dulled. I tried to express my gratitude by smiling, but it hurt.

"Your mother wants her plate back," I told Melas.

"That's what I told you." He turned to my grandmother. "What happened?"

"Ask Katerina. She is sitting right there. Katerina, tell him."

So I did. His expression darkened as the story went along. He had that look on his face guys get when they want to punch a wall. I wound down with a description of how I went after the Baptist with the slingshot, but he got away despite my stellar shooting.

"Sorry," I said when I was done.

"What for? I messed up. I put you in danger then left you there." He pushed a hand through his hair. Grandma went, "*Tsk*!" and he moved away from where she was molding the dough into a smooth ball. "He must know we're following you. I had to go to the bathroom, and that's when he pounced."

"Next time piss in your car," Grandma said.

"Too bad I didn't need to *ouro*."

Papou laughed. Phlegm rattled in his chest. "He got you there, old woman."

She ignored him. "Now the problem is I do not know what to do with you. I wanted to have you relocated to the worst village in Greece, far away from here, and Rita wants to send you to Turkey. But I think my granddaughter wants you to stay. And because there will come a time when this Family is hers to run, I think I will listen to her. But you only get a pass one time. After this …"

"Are you threatening me?"

"No." She stopped for a moment to look at him. "That was a promise."

I raised my hand. "I'm not running the Family, so you don't have to listen to me if you don't want to. It was just … a serving suggestion." Now that the ice was working its magic my mood was plummeting further. I was feeling somewhere between PMS and Medusa, and getting bitchier by the second. If Xander moved the meat my head might start spinning and spitting pea soup.

"Don't I get a say?" Melas asked.

"No," Grandma said.

"Okay." He raised both hands, careful not to show his flat palms to the room. "Just checking. You know I could arrest you all, right? For something, I'm sure."

"Not for long," Grandma reminded him.

"No *pithani aitia*," Papou said. No probable cause.

Melas blew out a long sigh. "I need a time machine."

Tell me about it. "Your plan isn't going to work," I said. "He's watching you watching me. He knows all the tricks because they used to be his tricks, too. We've got an old dog. What we need new tricks." Everybody looked at me. "We've got a saying back home: *Den boreís na didáxete éna gérikos skylos néa kólpa*." You can't teach an old dog new tricks.

"We say you cannot catch an old fox in a fox trap," Grandma said.

I nodded as best I could with meat stuck to my face. "We've got an old fox. We need a trap for something other than foxes."

Grandma stopped. Her face went grim. "I know what you are thinking."

"No, you don't," I said.

"You are thinking of letting him take you so Nikos can catch him."

I was only totally lying out my butt when I said, "No."

"Good. Because that will never happen. Nikos," she said. "It ends here. You want to find the man, use different bait. Katerina is off-limits."

Everyone in this kitchen wanted to roll me in bubble wrap and cotton balls, and stick me in a padded room until trouble passed. But in this Family there would always be trouble heavy breathing around the next corner, waiting to expose itself.

"It's not your decision to make," I told her. "I decide for myself."

The way she slid the second bowl aside made me shudder. No aggression in the movement, just cold, methodical calm. The bowl went exactly where she wanted, how she wanted. There was no question of it defying her. When she spoke, it was softly, dangerously, and the walls trembled. They knew about her big stick. God knows how many times this room had seen the thing.

"Remember the conversation we had in this room, Katerina. Remember that."

How could I forget her 'It puts the lotion on its skin' conversation? It wasn't just my head that remembered, my body had perfect recall, too. Currently it was pairing Grandma's quiet threat with the image of her going full Rambo with her shotgun, and it was saying, *Hey, Kat? Maybe Granny's got a point. She's smaller than you—and older than dirt—but she could cut off your head and bury you in a stolen grave.*

My face was throbbing. In fact, it and my heart were involved in a beat-off, which wasn't nearly as dirty as it sounded. My face was a fraction of a second behind my heart, irritating me with its inability to keep up. It was a lot like listening to a garage band, and my own body was the unfortunate garage. Inside my mouth, my molars began slow grinding.

I stood.

"Where are you going?" Grandma asked.

"To hang out with my goat."

By early evening I'd swapped rubbing alcohol and ice for vinegar. My sunburn was going supernova. Grandma, Aunt Rita, Papou, Xander, and I were in the yard, watching the sun swagger slowly home. It had really kicked my butt—but it was my own fault. Not far away, on the other side of the metal fence, the kids were kicking balls and splashing in the pool. Their mothers were reading, knitting, doing needlepoint, and occasionally, screeching. Their fathers were sipping beers and swapping bullshit stories. From the outside it probably looked peaceful, relaxing, but there was an awareness, a thin, bright wire of tension threaded through us all.

Sooner or later, something was going to happen, and everyone knew the person it would happen to, like it or not, was me.

I was the duck and I was sitting while they waited. I don't think it

mattered one bit that Grandma had put the kibosh on Melas's plan to catch the Baptist, or that she'd gone Godzilla on my willingness to be the chunk of cheese in the trap.

My chair was inches from the secret underground entrance.

Some things you never forget. They're plastered on the psyche with indelible spray paint. During my thirteenth year, my period arrived for its inaugural visit, without warning. It was late, late August, the harsh beginning of the new school year. I was in white shorts and Backstreet Boys T-shirt. I was cute, I was cool, I was suddenly bleeding all over my eighth grade biology class. Ms. Fletcher, the biology teacher, flipped out when I quietly asked to be excused, drawing every eye in the room to my Aunt Flo's unannounced arrival. The biology teacher had immediately launched into a monologue, pointing out that what was happening to me was completely normal, that no one was to make fun of me or they'd spend the rest of their lives in detention. She said this while my uterus slowly bled out beside her.

"Lady," I'd said, slicing into her sermon. "If you think the threat of detention is gonna stop them, you're a freakin' nutpie."

The only person who scored detention that day was me. And—go figure—nobody made fun of me. At least not to my face.

Mom picked me up. She bleached those shorts, taking the color white to Antarctic extremes. But I refused to wear them again. All I could see when I looked at them was my first ride on the cotton pony.

Grandma's yard was like those shorts. Whoever put the secret door in did a perfect job. It was all but seamless. But now I knew where it was it stuck out like the crimson tide.

"I hurt all over," I said. "I'm going to sleep this off."

Grandma watched me spoon out cheek kisses, then offered her own. As I pulled away she caught my face between her hands.

"One day you will understand," she said.

Yeah, right. They didn't call her Baboulas for nothing.

Back in my room I flopped down on the bed. Yelped. Jumped up. Then tried it again slowly. Not a yelp this time—more like a thin whine.

This much stinging, there way no way I was going to fall asl—

Chapter 21

WHEN I WAS a little girl I had one of those baby dolls with eyes that opened and closed. Stick her in a doll's bed, her eyes flicked shut. Sit her up, her plastic eyelids rolled back into her head.

I was like that doll. I sat up. My eyelids popped open.

Something had woken me.

The right side of my face still felt like I'd been playing the part of the mole in a whack-a-mole game, but my headache was down to a dull roar. I held my breath. Listened. If anyone was in the room with me they were dead or not human. My heart skipped a few beats then hurried to catch up to itself before my brain realized it had slacked off on the job.

I flicked on the lamp.

What the—

On the beside table were two new things that hadn't been there when I crash landed on the mattress and pillow. One was a handgun. The other was a slip of paper with a string of numbers.

Great. Somebody wanted me to do math. Clearly they didn't know me.

Oh. Wait. It had letters, too.

Not math. GPS coordinates.

For a few moments I sat there and tried to process, then I tapped the numbers into my phone and watched the virtual map stick a pin in the middle of nowhere.

The Baptist's location or Dad's?

Warm invitation or a terrible warning?

Only a nut would follow these breadcrumbs to their destination. The gun, the coordinates, they were fitting too neatly into my plan, which meant they were automatically suspect. Who had left them here? Were they a good witch or a bad witch?

This was, I was afraid, one of those times where there would be no answers unless I did something really dumb, like drive out to the middle of nowhere. I could feel myself making the decision to be one of those women, the obligatory idiot in a horror movie, who goes down to the basement when the basement is obviously where the big, bad evil is waiting in the thickest shadow, licking his lips, thinking, *Thank God for stupid people, otherwise I'd starve and there'd be no movie.*

The thing was, if what was waiting at the dot on the map was Dad or the Baptist, then it was my idea of a jackpot.

Down my short list of options I scrolled, looking over my alternatives to going alone. They were pretty pathetic.

I could wake Grandma and show her the note and gun. Then she'd confiscate the weapon, commandeer the coordinates, and send her own idea of a cavalry charging into the night. Possibly Takis and Stavros. They seemed to be her first choice when it came to lackeys. But I would be absolutely forbidden to take part.

Melas. Calling him was another option. He was, after all, the law. He'd also seize control of the situation, sitting me on the sideline with a patronizing head pat.

Aunt Rita? No, she'd be getting her beauty sleep. I just knew she was one of those women who went all out, sleep mask, a thick layer of gluey moisturizer over her sprouting stubble.

Then there was Xander. It was possible I could enlist his help, get him to shadow me, and hope he didn't run squealing to Grandma first.

Yeah, no.

Truth was, I didn't want them involved. I didn't fully trust a one of them. Not to mention—although here I was mentioning it—each one of them was a candidate for the role of benefactor. There was a limit to who could walk into this room while I was sleeping.

I was going. Alone. Do or die. Preferably no die.

My skin screeched when I eased my lower half into jeans and boots. Yeah, I could have done myself a favor, gone easy on myself with a dress, but a dress has fewer hiding places—and I had a feeling I'd need more than one. So I stuck with what I wore best: jeans, boots, a fitted T-shirt. I felt like a badass as I shoved the gun down the back of my pants—I barely winced at all—and the slingshot in my boot. The marbles I stashed in my pocket. I bunched up my hair in a ponytail, and I was ready to rock 'n' gently roll.

I took the alternate exit—the window—landing on Grandma's gardenias. There was a dark object hiding in a shadowy corner of the yard, but I recognized Xander's shape immediately. No one else around here was built like a sexy tank.

My breath caught. He'd turn me in to Grandma, for sure.

Doomed before I even reached the gate.

"Are you going to stop me?"

No response.

"Did you leave something on my bedside table?"

Nothing.

I held up the map on my phone. "What am I going to find if I go here?"

He kept staring straight ahead. I could have been a ghost, for all the attention he was paying me.

"Why not give it to Melas?"

He mumbled a name—Sofia—and began to snore.

Sweet zombie Jesus, the poor guy was asleep. Who could blame him? He'd been watching me almost around the clock, a bit like my own personal Greyfriars Bobby. I felt bad for the man. He was the one who'd bear the brunt of Grandma's anger when she realized I'd escaped her coop.

Unfortunately for Xander, my sympathy didn't outweigh my curiosity. So I climbed the fence, and dropped almost silently to the other side.

Suddenly, I froze.

Delayed reaction.

Maybe he didn't—or couldn't— speak when he was awake, but Xander had definitely spoken in his sleep, and the word he'd spoken was a woman's name. The mysteries were stacking up around here. It was beginning to look like the warehouse at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

When I recovered from that revelation, I resumed the sneaking. The dogs ignored me—they knew I was friend, not foe. The cats ignored everyone, unless they were in need of a lap. My goat was decimating a decorative bush. The night was one of the darkest I'd seen so far, with only a hint of moon. During daylight hours Greece wore perfect blue skies, but tonight she was a widow.

Out front Stavros was watching over my car.

"Katerina!" he hissed. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Escaping Baboula's protection."

Huh. He had me there. "That's pretty much true."

"You can't do that!"

I felt around under my car for the transmitter. When I found it, I tossed it to Stavros. "I need you to stay here and hold this. Or I can shoot you."

"You don't have a gun."

Every inch of me hurt but I managed to lift my shirt at the back to show him. "Say hello to my little friend," I said, sounding like Pacino on Helium.

"Virgin Mary, Katerina, you cannot just run away. Baboulas will kill me."

"Am I a hostage?"

"No, you are family."

"So she won't kill you. Worst case she'll revoke your internet privileges for a while."

"What will I do for fun?"

"Get a girlfriend."

"I can't afford a girlfriend."

I wasn't sure we were having the same conversation. That happened a lot around here. "Got to go."

The guard stopped me at the gate. He was on the outside and I was stuck on the inside. His name was Spiros, and he'd inherited a jumbo-sized version of the family nose. "Sorry, Katerina. I can't let you leave."

I leaned out the window and showed him my gun.

He showed me his.

His was much bigger—damn it—so I put mine away.

The gates loomed. They seemed taller at night, giant iron guardians that wouldn't let anybody pass, unless they were in possession of a good riddle or a super-secret password. I didn't know any riddles or passwords—except *password, 123*, my birth date, and *God*—which left me with threats.

"If you don't open the gate I'll ram it with my car."

He winced. "If you do that Baboulas will kick my *kolos*."

"So, open the gate and tell her I threatened to shoot you."

He pointed to the security camera that had captured the other guard's ding dong in solitary action. "She'll know I'm lying."

"Damn it." I chewed on a hangnail. "She thinks of everything."

His shoulders slumped in defeat. "Tell me about it."

"Okay, let me think." I sat there chewing while he waited, then I had a bright idea. I got out of the car, peered into the guardhouse. Nothing fancy inside. A smallish television, a computer, a wastebasket filled with takeout wrappers and today's paper. There was a smaller gate next to the big gates—one for foot traffic—and it wasn't locked. So in a jiffy I was on the other side of the gates. No car, but it was a starting point.

"Do you smoke?" I asked.

"When I want to look cool."

We'd have to talk later, Spiros and I. But right now I needed his lighter. When I asked for it he ponied up the plastic safety lighter. I flicked the flame on and tossed it into the wastebasket. Then I hit the button that opened the gates, raced back through the small gate, and jumped into my car.

Good guy Spiros was too busy kicking the flaming wastebasket onto the driveway to stop me. His primitive animal brain took over, and to a primitive animal brain fire trumps runaway cousin.

I'd make it up to him later.

If I made it back.

Chapter 22

MY HEART WAS pole dancing in my chest. What the heck was I doing driving up into the olive groves on Mount Pelion alone and at night? At the very least I should have stuffed Stavros into the trunk as backup. Grandma had a smallish army at her disposal—an army that could have been kind of, sort of, mine had I woken her and showed her the coordinates.

If she wasn't the one who'd left them for me.

I didn't even know what I'd find out here. Could be the Baptist, could be Dad. I was hoping for Dad, alive and well and ecstatic to see me.

I chewed my hangnail the whole way, until my cuticle stung.

The Beetle left the main road for a narrow vein of dirt and stones. The headlamps cast strange, thin light on the olive trees. In response, the trees' fingers extended ominously, as though they wanted to snatch me off this road, out of this world. I turned off the high beam to quit freaking myself out. The tires bumped and crunched. It wasn't long until the lowered lights pointed out a shack—not unlike Aunt Rita's safe house, but with even less charm—hiding between the trees. To call it dilapidated would have been a major exaggeration, like calling four inches eight.

I killed the motor, sat there breathing fast, wondering if this was hyperventilating, and if so would a plastic bag work as well as paper? My phone buzzed. Incoming text from Melas.

What are you doing?

I didn't know exactly, so I stuffed the phone back into my pocket, undid the clasp on the golden cross, hung it from the rearview mirror. It wasn't fuzzy dice, but all the same I felt like a mullet would have been more appropriate than this ponytail. The gun snuck up my right leg and hid in my boot. I got out of the car. Leaned against the hood. Then—heart clanging, blood whooshing, adrenaline pumps spiking into the 'She's gonna blow!' zone—I stuck my thumb and finger in my mouth and blasted a wolf whistle any young Greek guy would be proud of.

Someone might wonder why I didn't park further away and hoof it to the shack. That same someone might speculate that a much smarter woman would be sneaking around in the night, playing peeping Tom before revealing herself. And that same preachy, judgmental jerk might also be wondering why I hadn't brought backup. The truth was I

figured whoever was in inside was expecting me. That and I was tired of dodging invisible opponents. I wanted five minutes of face-to-face with someone who wasn't trying to run my life their way, even if they were the enemy.

Although, if they had engineered my visit then they were also manipulating me.

Gah!

The lights stayed dark but I could feel movement inside. The kraken was stirring, but would it come out to play?

And if it did, who would walk through that door?

My head wanted the Baptist to reveal himself. My heart wasn't convinced. It was doing a lot of protesting, and it had help from my churning stomach and my shaking knees. Really, my heart just wanted my daddy. Some mobster's granddaughter I was. Any other time I'd be grateful I was missing the criminal gene, but tonight I could have used its help.

One word drifted through the night. The sound of my name coming from this man's mouth sounded like an obscenity and a threat. He wanted to do bad things and he wanted to do them to me.

The Baptist.

"Where's your Greek hospitality?" I called out, with fake-o brass balls. "I came to see you and—what? No coffee, no cake?"

A thin laugh wafted my way.

The anticipation was killing me.

Then the front door banged open. A figure stepped out, but it was much too small to be the Baptist. He was a big guy; the second person wasn't big or—judging from the curves—a guy.

"Katerina?"

I squinted into the darkness. My sunburn winced. "Dina, is that you?"

What was he doing sending out his hostage? Gears clicked in my head. Was she working with him?

As she inched closer, her details became distinct. Dad's loony ex was wearing a floaty dress that was last fashionable when the 80s was a newborn. The way fashion was, if she held on to it another year or two it would be downright trendy.

"Nice dress," I said.

"It was your father's favorite when we were together."

Yikes. We were already entering the TMI zone. I was sorry I'd said anything.

"I have been waiting for him," she went on. "Pistof said he would come for me."

Pistof? That was the Baptist's real name? "My father?"

She nodded. "He promised when you arrived Michail would come,

for certain."

Lightbulbs flashed on in my head. "He didn't kidnap you, did he?" Poor desperate cow, she'd have listened to anyone who promised her another shot at Dad's heart.

She jerked her head up and made a *tst* sound. No. "He said I have to search you for weapons and wires."

Better her than him. If he put his hands on me I'd die fighting him off. "I'm unarmed," I lied, hoping if push came to shove, she'd be on my side.

"I have to check. Pistof said so."

There was a slingshot in one boot and a gun in the other. Melas's handcuffs were tucked into my back pocket. Dina would find them, but would she blab? Her hands travelled over me like I was a map and she was lost and trying to find her way. My breath caught when she reached my boots, but she patted both shapes then stood.

"All she has is a phone," she called out.

"Bring it to me," he said from inside the dark rectangle. Dina trotted back like a good minion. She vanished into the box of concentrated night, then something fell. Metal and plastic splintered. All that money I'd spent on insuring the thing, now probably I'd be too dead to score a replacement.

"Walk towards my voice—slowly," the Baptist said.

Knocking knees. Frantic pulse. Fast breathing. I was a heart attack waiting to happen. But I walked.

Pistof stepped out of the dark, into the slightly lesser dark. He leaned in the open doorway. "You came."

"As if I'd do anything else."

So he *was* behind the note. If he didn't leave it himself, someone must have helped him. I wondered if he knew that same someone had left me a gun.

He flipped the light on. The cabin was stripped down to essentials. A bedroll on the floor. Empty pizza boxes. Empty cola bottles lined up along one wall. All plastic, no glass. In one corner sat a metal trough filled with water. No need to guess what that was for. Drowning in the trough were my cell phone's shattered bones. It looked like he'd been hiding here for some time.

"No wire?"

"They gave me one. It's gone. I do things my way." It was my Eric Cartman moment: *I'm Katerina Makris, I do what I want*. "Why are you doing this—any of this?"

"Who else is there? The police can't. They're cuffed to the law. You want to clean up shit, you have to do it outside the eye of the law."

"So what if you break the law doing that—right?"

"There is shit and there is shit."

"Let me guess. You consider yourself a higher form of shit?"

He shook his head like the disappointment was mighty. "Why you want to get yourself mixed up with those people? If you had stayed in America you would be safe."

"I don't think so. You've got no way to get to my father without me." I nodded to Dina, sorry that I was about to smash her feelings. "He dumped her years ago. She's the last thing he'd come out of hiding for—if he's hiding."

Dina burst into tears. "He loved me. He never said it, but I could tell. He always called me his girl."

"He called a lot of woman his girl, including my mother—his wife. This one—" I tilted my head towards the weeping woman. "—was just a good time. You're a man, you know what it's like. Once a man is done with a good time, he moves on to another good time."

"I'm not a bad man," he said. "I would have left you alone. But you had to come here."

My laugh was humorless. "I didn't have a choice. My cousins drugged me and threw me onto a private plane. But I get it. I do. You want to be the hero, do the right thing, win the war against crime."

He was nodding. "That's all I've been doing. Cleaning up shit."

"Hey, I get it," I said. "You think I want to be a mobster's kid? All my life I thought my father was a truck driver. I'm not exactly thrilled he's been lying to me since I was born. I want him to show up so I can kick his butt."

He liked that. The gleaming tombstones lined up in his mouth said he liked it a lot. "Even his daughter sees he is shit. Good."

I wasn't thrilled about a psycho calling my father shit, but truth was I wasn't exactly overjoyed that Dad had let me find out about my family the hard way. A bit of warning would have been nice. A little, '*Hey, Kat, your grandmother is a crime lord, and by the way, the safe is stuffed with money, alternate identities, and a gun,'* over our weekly dinners would have gone a long way. Still, this nut didn't get to call my father names.

"I do," I lied.

"There are cops who back me. Big names. Important people. They want me to score big, take out some of the major Families so they don't have to."

"I understand. We all want to bring our children up in a safe world."

He nodded. "I killed my first mobster when I was rookie. Shot him in the face. The other guys on the force warned me that killing a man was hard, that I would feel guilt for the rest of my life. You take a man's life, he sits on your shoulders until you're in the grave, they said. But that didn't happen. I felt good about it. I was doing God's

work, cleaning up the streets, making Greece safer."

Pretty sure God had a whole '*Thou shalt not kill*' thing going on, but I could be wrong. I had never read the Greek translation of the Bible. And to be fair, even in the English language version, the Guy did enjoy plucking out eyes and playing cruel practical jokes on people to test their faith. Ask Job: that poor guy lost everything because God was feeling needy that day.

"I let the police teach me everything they knew," he continued. "I made contacts, made friends. Raided databases. Learned everything there was to know."

"Then you left."

He nodded. "It was time. If I waited until they let me go I would have been too old."

This was his life's work. And somehow Dad and I were caught up in it, even though my father hadn't lived a life of crime in thirty years. Obviously Pistof didn't believe in redemption.

What about the money, the passports, the gun?

Shaddap. We'll talk later, brain.

"So how does the plan go next?" I asked him.

"I have let it be known that I have you and Dina. Soon, your father will come. When he comes I will kill him."

The olive drained out of Dina's skin, leaving her a greenish yellow. I felt sorry for her. She thought she'd have a chance at winning back the love of her life. Instead, she was stuck in a slumlord's shack with a psycho former cop and her ex's bitchy kid.

"What if he can't?" I asked him. "What if he was really kidnapped?"

"I don't believe it," he said. "He and Koulouris, those two assholes, they were always faking their deaths, faking their murders, pretending to be kidnapped. This is just another one of their games."

"Except Cookie is dead."

He grinned. "This time for good."

"What happens after that?"

"The funny thing about that …" He wagged a finger at me. "I never intended to kill you." That finger moved from me to Dina and back again. "Either of you. I don't kill people who haven't earned their death. I'm a good man. But then I heard a story about how the old woman has plans for you to run the Family, when she's in the grave. She prefers you over her own sons for the job. And I say to myself, this is an opportunity I cannot miss. I have a chance to wipe out your Family. First your father, then you. After that, your uncles and the others. The old woman … how long does she have? Not long. She's sick."

I tried, but surprise splashed itself all over my face, giving me no time to hide.

He chuckled. His mirth grated my nerves. "Why am I not surprised she did not tell you? That one, she keeps everything clutched tight against her chest. She has the *karkinos*."

Cancer. Once again, that asshole cancer wanted to snatch family away from me.

"How do you know?"

"I listen and I look. I have eyes everywhere. Maybe even in your Family, eh? Not everybody is your friend in this world. So here you are, the heir to the Makris Family criminal empire. I kill your father, and you, and your uncles, and their children …" Two palms up. "… and it ends."

He was crazy. He'd rationalized the whole thing, painted himself as some kind of Spartan, hellbent on ridding Greece of the Persians. I understood wanting to end crime, but this was my *family*.

"Does it change things if I tell you I have no desire to join the Family business, let alone take over? I already told my grandmother 'No.' "

"You say that now but you will fall. Slowly, slowly, you will become one of them, and you will not know it until it has happened and you are the one handing out orders."

"I think you've seen *The Godfather* one too many times. I'm no Michael Corleone."

"You will be."

I still didn't get it: the vendetta. Why my family, why so much hate for my father? When I asked, Dina raised her hand. "Oh, oh, I know the answer to this question."

"*Skasmos*!" he barked. "You know nothing."

Hands on hips. "Oh really? You forget I was in school with you both. I remember. When Michail and I were together, he used to laugh about you."

"Not helping," I said.

She slumped back against the wall. "If you were my daughter you would have better manners."

"If you were my mother I'd be crazy, too."

Pistof threw his hands in the air. "Women!"

"She has a gun in her boot." She gave me a *so-there* smirk.

Aunt Rita was wrong about Dina: she wasn't a *mouni*, she was an asshole. My entire pull-out-a-gun-and-shoot-him-in-the-leg plan went up in smoke.

His expression turned deadly. Those black eyes of his gleamed with something more than anger—decades of resentment turned septic.

"You little *skeela*, you try to get clever on me, eh? The gun. Now. On the floor. Kick it to me."

I bent down, retrieved the gun, laid it on the floor. Then I kicked it

across the room with all the force I could muster. It flew. Hit the wall with a thud that sounded like a bird hitting glass. Then it fell to the floor with a sad, little *clank*.

"Huh," I said. "I kind of expected it to go *bang*."

"New guns," he said, picking it up. "They have a firing pin block."

Over in her corner, Dina began to cry harder. Pistof, a.k.a. the Baptist stalked across the room, backhanded her so hard her head bounced off the wall. She made a noise like an angry cat. He grabbed her around the neck, shoved her head into the trough. Water slopped over the edges. Her arms flailed.

I stood there helplessly, wishing I knew one of those cool neck-snapping tricks, or maybe that throat ripping thing from *Roadhouse*.

"Let her go," I said. "Your business is with me. She's nothing to me or my father."

He dragged her out of the trough, cast her onto the floor like dirty laundry. I rushed over to help her back to the wall, and even though she'd filled my aunt's helmet with crap, and she had a disturbing obsession with my father, I put my arm around her shoulders.

"You totally fail at being the good guy," I told Pistof. "You should look into remedial classes."

He reached for the light switch, plunging us into darkness with one tiny *snick*. The door open and closed. A moment later something scrambled up the side of this dump and settled on the roof.

"What is he doing?" Dina asked me.

Good question. I thought about it.

"We're the bait, he's the trap. He's moving to higher ground to give himself the advantage if my father comes."

"Are we going to die?"

"Probably."

"Why won't Michail come?" Her voice was tearstained. "He loves me. I know it in my heart."

I knew a lot of things in my heart. That we were going to die, mostly. "That was a really long time ago. You need to move on."

She did that little *tst* and jerked her head up. "He still loves me. He said so."

My heart stopped. "When did he say so?"

"In my dream."

Jeez. My heart returned to its regular beating. "He won't be coming," I said. "If he could, he'd be here already. Wherever he is it's someplace bad and he can't escape. As soon as that weirdo on the roof realizes it, we're both dead."

There was a longish pause as the gravity of the situation sank in. "So what will we do?"

"We sit. We wait. We see who comes—if anyone." There was

something unsettling about my ability to be calm, under the circumstances. It was as though I had dark, dusty corners in my personality that had been hidden, thus far. *Know thyself*, read the Delphic maxim carved upon Apollo's temple, and originating with God knew who. The saying had been attributed to most of the Greek philosophers, at one point in history or another. I thought I knew myself, but in Greece I was discovering myself and I were only good acquaintances. Like *Shrek* I was turning out to be an onion: I had layers.

Without my phone I couldn't tell the time, but the night was thick and growing thicker. The clouds parted briefly then, fluffing the covers, they hid the narrow fingernail of moon again. Every so often, the psycho on the roof shifted, and the whole shack would protest quietly.

"Nobody is coming," I told Dina. "If we want to be saved we have to do it ourselves."

"How?"

I closed my eyes, tried to recall everything that was in the room. The trough, my broken phone, the bedroll, and the empty soda bottles.

"Bottle caps. I need a few." I could have used the marbles in my pocket, but I was saving those in case I had a chance to go Biblical on the guy.

I had to hand it to her, Dina jumped to it. She began unscrewing bottles with a kind of fever, and soon we had a loose pile of bottle tops on the windowsill.

Next, I needed to get that door open without the psycho upstairs hearing. I crouched by the door, and inch by quiet inch, I opened it enough to fit my hand and the slingshot. I loaded up the first bottle cap, pulled back on the rubber, and aimed at a patch of black slightly deeper than the rest.

It didn't have the whip-cracking effect of a pebble or stone, but its landing was audible. I held my breath. The weight on the roof shifted. Pistof had heard it and his interest was piqued.

Good doggie.

I waited for him to settle into his new position, then I fired off a second bottle top with a calm that was starting to fracture. Stick me in an MRI machine, my brain would be a Ming vase.

The third bottle top was the lucky one. His boots hit the ground. If it had been daytime I'd have seen a thin sepia cloud around his ankles. But in the night there was nothing but black-on-black shapes. He stood there for a moment, going nowhere in a hurry.

Go, you bastard. Eat my bait.

If he moved away from the shack, Dina and I would be able to slip

out and hide in the undergrowth or climb a tree or something, until we could get to my car.

He whirled around and reached through the door, fingers clamping my throat. One-handed, he lifted me off the ground and my soul began to tear at its seams.

"You think you're clever, you little *skeela*?"

I shook my head as much as I could—which wasn't much. I couldn't scream, couldn't breathe, couldn't think. My lights were dimming fast.

He shook me. My brain rattled in my head.

Then something whispered past my ankles. I hoped it was Dina running for help.

Pistof yelped. He twisted away and I fell.

"You bit me, you fucking *putana*!" he yelled.

Dina shoved something into my hand. When the Baptist turned back to resume his strangulation project, a surprise was waiting. Dina might be a loon but she was also one smart cookie: she'd relieved him of my gun. Now it was back in my hands. Two-handed, I shoved the muzzle into the hollow where his head met his neck.

He laughed. There was madness in the sound, but that wasn't the frightening part. No, it was the sanity behind it that scared the dickens out of me.

"Shoot me and you'll cross the line. There's no going back after you pull that trigger. Your family is shit," he said. "But you don't have to be."

"Yeah," I rasped. "They're shit. But they're my family."

The little gun clicked in my hand. Nothing happened. No booms, no bangs, no muzzle flash to light up the night.

But his head exploded anyway.

Chapter 23

MY SAVIOR'S name was Xander, and he wasn't alone. Four musketeers came to our rescue: Xander, Melas, Stavros, and Takis. All four in black, all four prepared for war.

I was covered in blood and bone and brains that weren't mine. But they could have been, and my knees knew it even if my mind hadn't caught up yet. They buckled and I fell, but not far. Xander caught me on the way down.

"How did you know?" I asked them.

Takis hooked his thumb at Stavros. "What, you think this *vlakas* can keep his mouth shut? As soon as you left he came running to me."

Stavros grinned. "Lies. I walked."

"I know a run when I see one," Takis said, goading him. "You were running like the time you shi—"

"*Kaka Vrakas*," I said, recalling the night Grandma met us at the airstrip in the limo.

"Bah." Stavros chopped two hands at his groin. "I will be there when you are old and you need a diaper. We will see who is *Kaka Vrakas* then."

Monkey see, monkey do, I copied his hand signal. My cousins laughed. Takis slapped Stavros on the arm. "You tell her what it means. I have to take care of …" He nodded to Pistof's body.

"I am not going to tell her that," Stavros said, but he led me away from the scene of the crime. Which is exactly what it was. My brain caught up with my body. I started to shiver and shake.

"It's okay," he said. "The first one is always the worst."

Is that what this was, the first? First and last. Never again.

"Where's Melas?" I asked.

"He went to get the car."

Sure enough, it wasn't long before an SUV crunched toward us. The light was harsh and almost acidic. I wanted to shrivel up like a salted slug. He left the motor running, jumped out. His mouth was grim and the rest of his face didn't look any happier. Behind me, an argument was breaking out.

"I know," I said as his mouth opened to shoot admonishments at me. "What the hell was I doing—right?" May as well beat him to it.

His shoulders slumped. The storm on his face retreated. "Something like that. You okay?"

"Better than him." I glanced back to check out the commotion

behind me. Takis had an axe and Dina was trying to wrestle it out of his hands. When it was obvious she wasn't going to win, Dina settled for kicking Pistof's body.

I knew how she felt. I wanted to kick it, too. The only thing stopping me was that the whole death thing had put a damper on his ability to feel pain.

"Jesus," Melas said.

"She's crazy, but she's not all bad." Even if she had filled Aunt Rita's motorcycle helmet with poop. "How did you end up with them?"

"As soon as they went into panic mode, I was on my way."

"They called you?"

Big, wide, self-satisfied smile. "Something like that."

I thought about it for a moment. "You bugged Grandma's place?" Sneaky. Very sneaky. "The flowers?"

The smile spread. "Sometimes flowers are just flowers." He looked down at the ground, shook his head, laughed. "The GPS on your phone. I knew you'd left the compound, so I drove out to see what was happening."

"What happens to him now?"

Serious again. "He disappears. There's no other way. Someone finds his body there are going to be questions, and the answers will get me fired—or worse." He grabbed my shoulders, held me still. "Don't look behind you."

An axe fell. Funny how something with a blade that sharp could sound so dull. My teeth began to chatter, my body shook. The warm, sticky night was turning cold fast.

"Shock," Melas said, rubbing the goosebumps that had sprouted on my arms. "It's okay. You're safe now."

Was I? I didn't feel safe—not with Dad still missing.

A moment later, Takis marched past me with a sack in his hand. He threw it into the back of the SUV.

"What's in the bag?" I asked.

"Eh, better you don't know."

Four men to the rescue. Only two of them were blood, but to me they all felt like family.

Sleep wasn't happening any time soon, so I sat in the kitchen and shivered while Grandma fixed hot cocoa and plied me with pastries. She had shooed everyone else away while I was in the shower, hot water blasting the night away. Although the sight of the blood and bits of Pistof sluicing down the drain made me want to pray to the porcelain outhouse, I had refused to close my eyes. I didn't want to

forget. Something would have been lost if I had—humanity, perhaps.

When I was done, and the water ran clear, I had started the shower over again.

Now here I was at the kitchen table, sinking my teeth into soggy laters of phyllo pastry and sweet custard. *Galaktobouriko*. It was just what I needed. Life doesn't happen while you're eating cookies and cakes and candy. Time stands still, watches you eat, then it jogs to catch up when you're done.

Our talk was all small, which suited me.

Until Grandma smacked me out of left field.

"I saw you once when you were a little girl, you know."

I didn't know, and when I said so she nodded. "Your father did not know, but your mother, she knew."

"Mom knew?" My world was suddenly tilting on its axis. The poles were shifting. This was seriously apocalyptic.

She settled in the chair across from me. She looked frail and almost transparent, and I wondered if Pistof had told me the truth about the cancer.

"Your mother used to write and send photos. One time I came to America and we played at the playground together while your mother watched. Ask Xander. He was there, too. He is a little older than you, but he took good care of you at that playground."

The punch-shaped surprises kept on coming.

"Xander, who is he?" There was a coldness in my gut, a creeping feeling she was about to reveal him as my father's secret baby or something. "Is he my half brother?"

She laughed. The table shook. It sounded like a cool joke—I wanted in. "No, he is not our blood. He is the son of a very old enemy. One who is long dead."

"Did you kill his father?"

The laughter died. Remorse jumped into its place, but only for a moment. She quickly pulled a sack over the runaway emotion. "His father, his mother, his whole family. Only Xander was left. He was a baby, an innocent. The women—including his mother—were not to be touched, but something went very wrong that night."

"Does he know?"

When she nodded it was with a heavy head. "He knows. I never kept it from him. It is his truth. His story. Everybody has a right to their own history. I gave him everything that belonged to his family, things that were rightfully his, so he will always know where he came from and who he is."

"Aren't you worried he'll turn on you?" Because I knew how these things went, thanks to cable and Netflix and books. Dishes were best served cold, sometimes decades later.

"No. Xander and I, we have always been one-hundred-percent honest with each other. If he wanted retribution he would tell me, and I would give it to him. He knows this." She fell silent for a moment. Then: "Family is not always blood, Katerina. Blood is not always family."

Maybe it was her candidness that pushed the words off my tongue, maybe it was the night itself. It was a watershed night.

"There's a leak in the Family. Pistof … said some things. I think he had someone inside."

She reached across the table, palm up. An invitation. When I put my hand in hers, I found it warm, papery, but with a core of steel.

"I know. There are always leaks and informants. Always somebody who wants to climb the ladder or climb a different ladder. Some people get greedy and some people get scared. Sometimes those people are those we love, people who we trust with our lives."

A big lump sat itself down in my throat. Shoving the question past its bulk wasn't easy, but it had to be asked. "What happens to them?"

"They know what they are doing when they betray us. They accept the consequences of their actions."

Gulp. That … didn't sound good. So I said the only thing I could say, under the circumstances.

"Dad is still missing."

"We will find him." She clutched her black-covered heart. "I swear it."

I believed her.

She left me sitting at the table to open her baking cupboard. It was three in morning, but this was her thing, her coping mechanism.

"Later I will have a room fixed up for you in the main house."

I took in the shabby kitchen, the peeling paint on the molding, the worn floor. I examined the woman with the sugar sack in her arms—a woman who had made the effort to know Mom and me, even though I couldn't recall the incident. My father's mother. My grandmother.

All these years I'd mistaken myself for someone who had almost no one.

"It's okay," I said. "I think I'd rather stay here."

She said nothing.

She baked.

And me, I watched. Until I finally I said, "Can you teach me how you do that?"

I hid in the shade, moving whenever the sun made a grab for me. Fortunately, the courtyard had several tables with comfortable

outdoor chairs and generous umbrellas. I was armed with a spray bottle of vinegar and cold tea—both folk remedies for my tragic sunburn. Takis's wife Marika kept me company, until her boys started a fire in the dumpster out back, using a magnifying glass and more patience and diligence than I'd witnessed in most adults.

"Boys will be boys," I said, to no one in particular as Marika hauled two of her sons across the flagstones, back to their second-floor apartment. An apartment could have been mine, too. But a gear had slipped in my brain and I'd committed to living with Grandma—at least until we found Dad. He was still out there somewhere. God knows where. God knows with whom. And that same God—if He existed—probably knew why. But not me; all this sun and I was still playing mushroom in the dark.

Nearby, my goat was chewing hay. Grandma said she was fattening him up for a feast, but I suspected she liked the way he failed to give a rat's hiney about her rules. Could be that's what she liked about me, too.

"I don't know whether to stop and drop back to first gear or crack open a fire hydrant."

I jumped. It was Detective Melas. He'd managed to sneak up on me.

"Am I that red?"

A grin crept over his lips. "Honey, I bet you glow in the dark."

Damn him, he looked good. Today he was all dressed up in flat-front dress pants and a white shirt, casually unbuttoned at the neck. He was clean shaven and he smelled like a long, hot shower had taken place in his very recent history. His hair was perfect until he ran a hand through it and messed the whole thing up.

"What's going on?"

"Figured I'd come check on your sunburn."

"Am I in trouble?"

"Only with my mother. She's expecting you for coffee."

"Today?" I squeaked.

"Yesterday."

Yikes! "How about if I give you the plate?"

He went *tst*. "Too late. You're on her radar." He glanced around, tugged a chair into position beside me. Leaned in close. "You okay?"

"Sure. I'm great."

He gave me one of those looks, but I wasn't about to cave and tell him the truth, that my insides resembled a chronic hoarder's stash. He was an unknown quantity, despite the badge, and my trust levels weren't at an all-time high. When I unleashed the blubbering beast it would be in private—just me and a pillow.

"How's Dina?" I asked, focusing his discerning lens elsewhere.

"She sent *bonbonieres* to the whole department yesterday." My face must have given away my insider knowledge, because the next thing out of his mouth was, "I guess I don't need to tell you what was in them."

"Not sugared almonds?"

"No, not sugared almonds."

My smile went into hiding behind my hand. "I guess she wanted to thank you for a job well done."

"She's crazy."

"She really is," I said. "But she came through for me in the end. Which means I owe her. What are you going to do about the party favors?"

"The captain sent her a 'Thank you' note from the department."

My thoughts ticked over to the inevitable. "What happens when someone notices Pistof is missing?"

He shrugged. "Difficult to say. There might be questions. Or they might want it to go away."

"Do you know why he hated my father so much?"

Another *tst*. "Maybe your father's old friends know."

I thought about it. "Dina knows, too. She mentioned it when we were … when we were captive."

"Are you going to ask her?"

"Probably." I told him about how her house was a shrine to Dad.

He made a face. "You've got my number if you need it. Or if you just want it."

"Melas …"

"Nikos."

"Too late," I said. "I already think of you as Melas."

He stood, stretched. It did things his body that made me want to pounce. Evidently it showed, because he leaned down and tucked a piece of my hair behind my ear. His breath was warm against the crispy fried shell. "I'm going to kiss you again—and soon. Count on it."

That afternoon I went to church. Father Harry rushed to greet me, but backed off quickly when he got a load of my sunburn and bruised face. My eye was less black, more green now. Aunt Rita offered to balance the act, give me two green eyes or conceal the other with magic spackling paste, but I couldn't be bothered hiding what had happened. Maybe I was teaching myself a lesson I needed to learn. Stay away from swinging fists wielded by psychos. Or learn to duck.

"Let me know if you need anything, eh?" Father Harry said. He went to pat me on the shoulder, but then retracted his hand when he

realized he'd have to peel me off his glorious gilt ceiling if he made contact. He flashed a sympathetic smile, then he vanished into the room at the back of the church.

The priest was gone, but I wasn't alone.

Grandma had been keeping Xander busy. Since he blew Pistof's head off his shoulders, I'd only seen the silent man from a distance. Now here he was at the front of the church, legs splayed in the front pew, eyes on the marble mosaic floor. He didn't strike me as religious, but what did I know? Thanks to Grandma he'd lost his whole family and found a new one with their enemy. He'd killed a man to save my life. Both good reasons to want to have a powwow with The Man Upstairs. I'd make sure to put in a good word for him when it was my turn.

I sat beside Xander, leaving a respectable distance between us. He hadn't dressed up for the occasion. He was in shorts, running shoes, and a sleeveless T-shirt, his ball cap beside him on the polished wood of the pew. Had he run here?

"I heard you, you know. When you were sleeping you spoke. You said a woman's name. Sofia. Just in case you're keeping it a secret, I haven't told anyone—and I won't."

Silence.

Then he unfolded his body and stood. He was strong, physically and mentally. He was densely muscled but he could move like a cat. He was a killer. But I'd seen tenderness in the man, too. And he was gentle now as he touched his hand to the top of my head, as though delivering a benediction. I looked up and met his dark eyes. He was unreadable and I was all out of Rosetta Stones. Not a word passed between us. I watched him walk away. He stopped to light candles—six in all, and stuffed a thick wad of euros in the wooden box.

Then he was gone.

I turned back around. I was alone. Which is how I needed to be for what came next.

"I know you're listening in," I said in English. "Whoever you all are. I'm an American citizen and so is my father. We pay taxes on time. I've never broken the law. I don't really count underage drinking, because who doesn't do that? If my father dies because you guys refused to part with information or you couldn't be bothered helping, I'm going to be seriously pissed." I looked up at the man on the cross. "Sorry. But it's the most apt word under the circumstances." Back to the matter at hand. "If you can help … do it. Please."

With a jittery heart and rubbery knees I stalked over to the candles. I lit one apiece for Mom, Dad, and Grandma. The fourth I lit for myself. Something told me this thing was far from over, and I'd need all the divine help I could get.

Outside there was no sign of Xander, but the people of Makria were going about their business, living life as if they knew no other way. They smiled and waved to me like I was one of theirs.

It struck me that maybe the quiet man hadn't gone to church to pray.

Maybe he had been there to talk.

Thank you for reading *Disorganized Crime*, the first of Kat Makris' adventures! Kat's story continues in Trueish Crime, available now.

Want to be notified when my next book is released? Sign up for my mailing list: http://eepurl.com/ZSeuL. Or like my Facebook page at: https://www.facebook.com/alexkingbooks.

All my best,

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